HEAVY OBJECT Volume 5

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鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI
イラスト・オブジェクトデザイン／
凪良
NAGIRYO

ヘヴィオブジェクト
HEAVY OBJECT
オブジェクト
PURPLE OF TECHNIQUE 死の祭典

か-12-31
電撃文庫

ヘヴィオブジェクト 死の祭典

鎌池和馬

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ヘヴィーオブジェクト 死の祭典

「……お兄ちゃんは、最後まで私の味方でいてくれるよね……？」

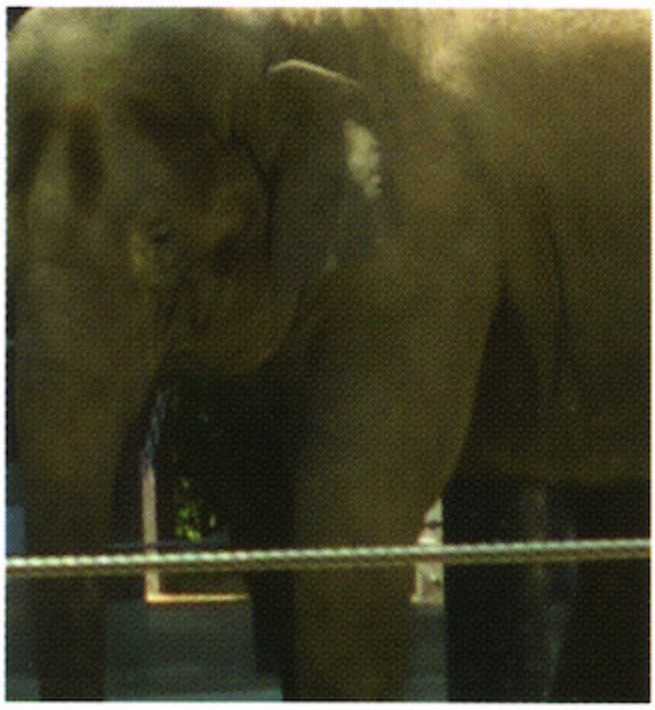
「――――とでも言って欲しいのか？　この変態め」

全世界が待ちに待ったスポーツの祭典、テクノピック。世界的勢力の代理戦争であるこの一大イベントに、『資本企業』航空PMC所属の一二歳の少女が参加した。課せられたのは、スポンサーが売り出す新型ライフルを使用して好成績を上げること。

「スポンサーの許可がとれたからって、撮影クルーをバスルームの中にまで入れるなよ」「あの失礼ですが、そちらの需要はスタイルを鑑みて、ユーザーニーズはほぼ皆無というか、我々も商売でやってんだぞと」「どこ見てコメントしやがったこの野郎」

……クウェンサーとヘイヴィアは？

そんな細かいことはどうでもいいのだ近未来アクション！



鎌池和馬（かまちかずま）

本日のレプリカント的観察日記。象です。おそらく世界で最も鼻を器用に扱う動物？　何事も工夫次第だという事を教えてくれます。感覚器官、アーム、放水とよりどりみどりなので、遠隔操作のオフロードカーにつけるだけで用途の幅がぐぐっと広がるかも？

【電撃文庫作品】

インデックス
とある魔術の禁書目録①～㉒
インデックス
とある魔術の禁書目録SS①②
インデックス
新約とある魔術の禁書目録①②
ヘヴィーオブジェクト
ヘヴィーオブジェクト 採用戦争
ヘヴィーオブジェクト 巨人達の影
ヘヴィーオブジェクト 電子数学の財宝
ヘヴィーオブジェクト 死の祭典

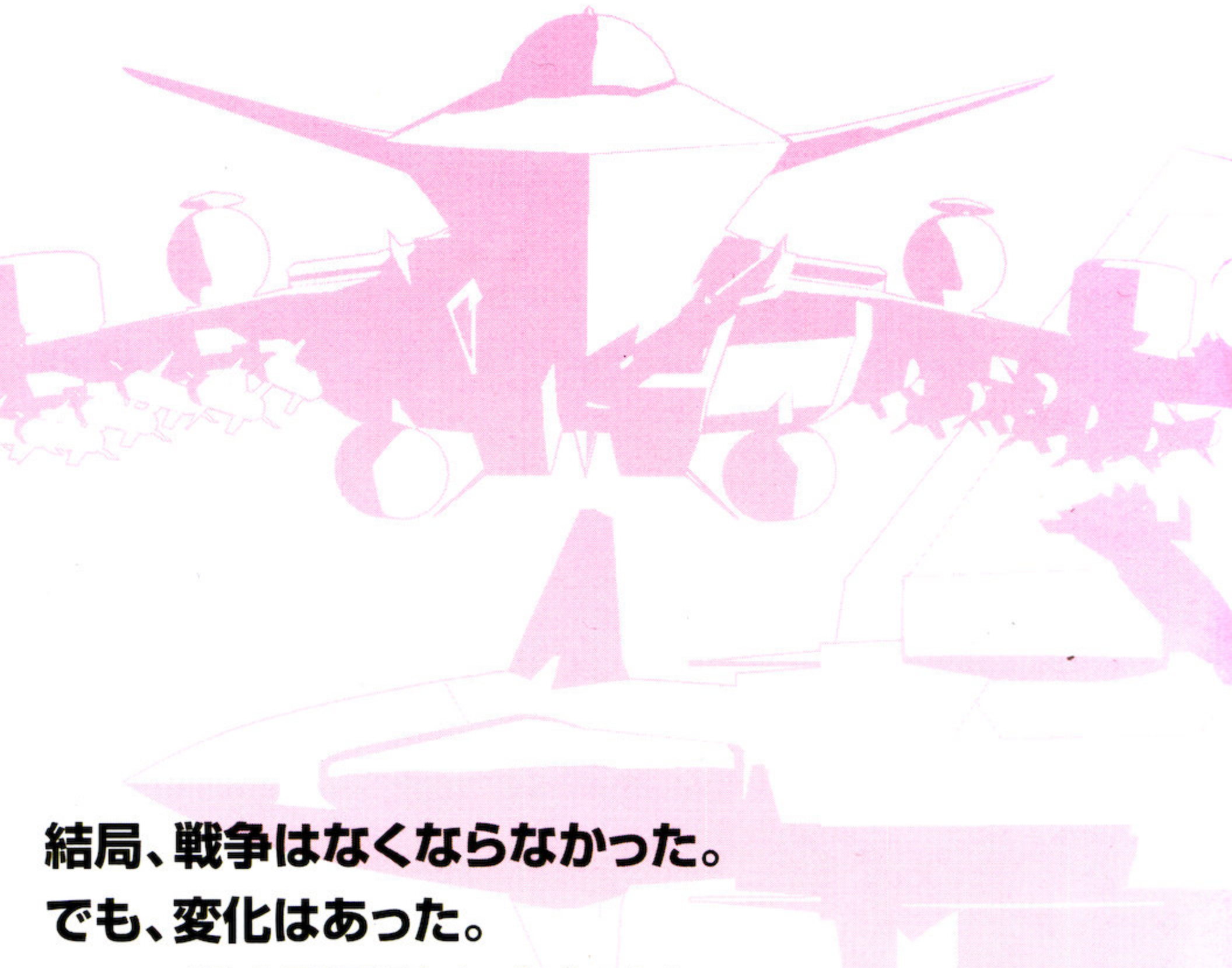
イラスト：凪良（なぎりょう）

バンダイナムコのゲーム『アルトネリコ』シリーズのキャラクターデザインをつとめる。電撃文庫では『シャープ・エッジ』『F』（著／坂入慎一）、『アプラクサスの夢』（著／高橋弥七郎）などを担当する。個人サークル『S.E.C』でも活動中。http://www.sec.or.tv/

カバー／暁印刷

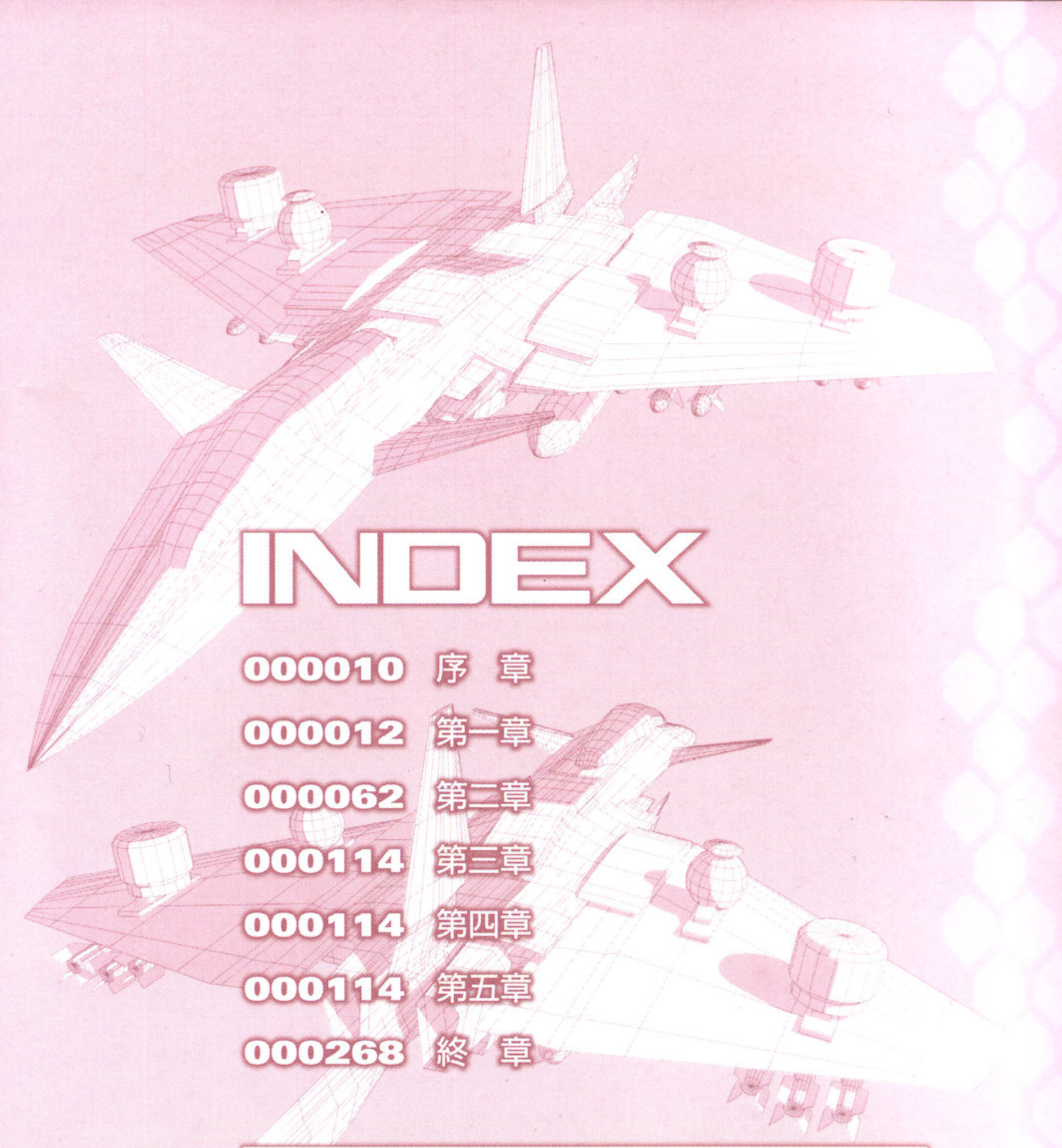
鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI

イラスト・オブジェクトデザイン
凪良 NAGIRYO



結局、戦争はなくならなかった。
でも、変化はあった。
――超大型兵器オブジェクト。
それが、戦争の全てを変えた。

ヘヴィーオブジェクト
HEAVY OBJECT
PURGE OF TECHNOPOLIS 死の祭典



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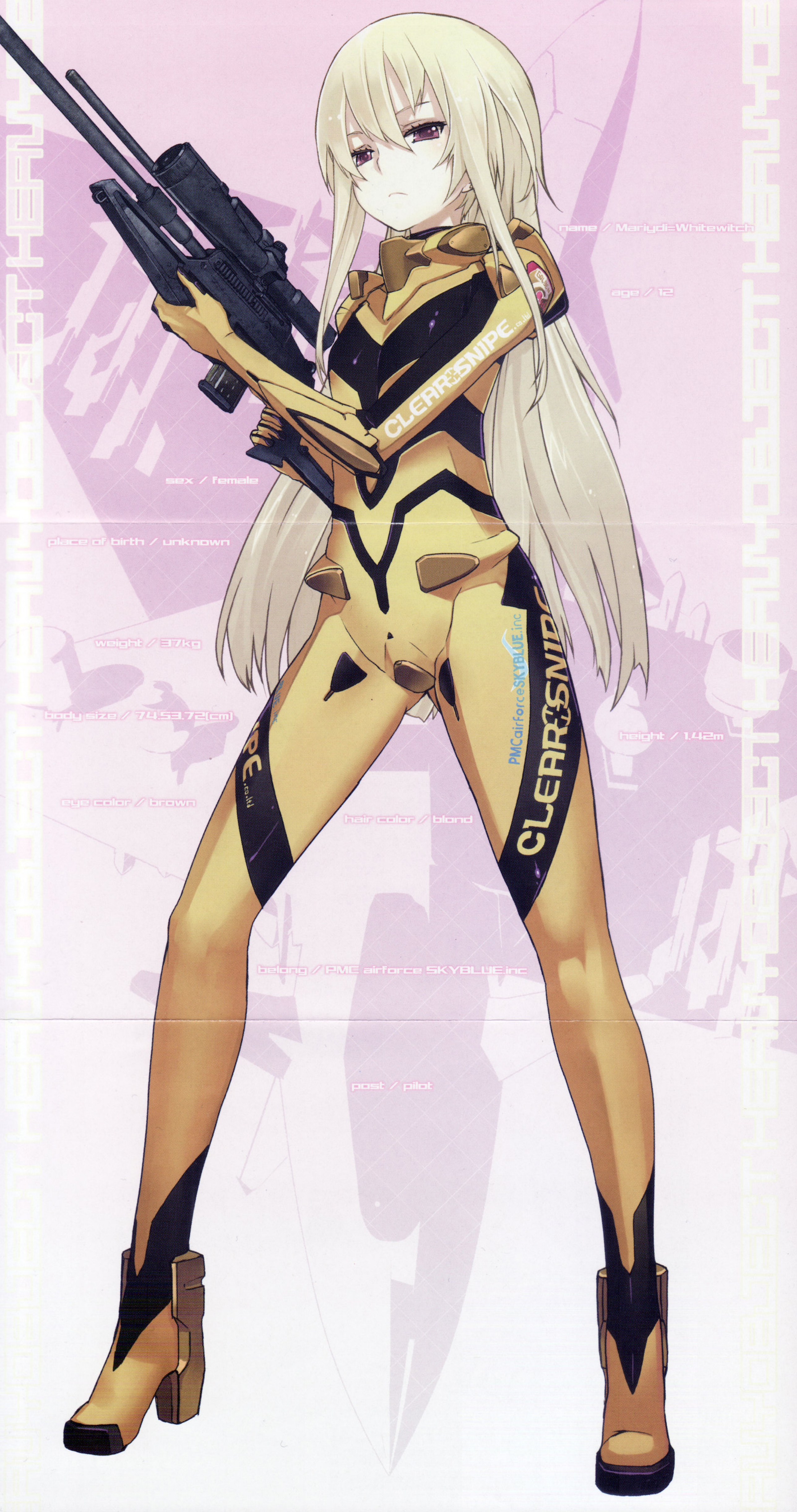
【Harpuiai】

VTOL性のある戦闘機。外装・基本的なフレームは『正統王国』のS/G-31と同じ(『正統王国』から亡命した技師が設計したため)。
後部にはジェットエンジンのベクタースラストノズルに特徴的なパドルがあり、これによって『正統王国』のS/G-31との差異が見られる。

パイロットは、顔にゴーグルと酸素吸入用ヘッドセットを、喉には小型のマイクを取り付け、高速飛行中の気道を確保する。
装備が単純なヘルメットとマスク方式でないのは、オブジェクト操縦士エリート用技術を流用しているため(オブジェクトを操縦するエリートはヘルメットなどで顔を隠す必要はなく、オブジェクト全盛時代では、使い物にならない戦闘機などには国防費は回されない)。

Designed by Hirokazu Watanabe(2725 Inc.)

『北欧禁猟区』からやってきた
航空PMC『スカイブルー』所属の戦闘機乗り
マリーディ＝ホワイトウィッチ
「あれが敵兵だって？　本物の戦争を知らない温室育ちは気楽だな」
テクノピックに出場する
マリーディにあてがわれた身辺警護担当
護衛の男
「俺の仕事は君の護衛だ。
最低限の職務を全うする」
ドーピング専門の薬剤師
ステイシー＝パーメット
「はいはーい、こわーいお注射の時間でちゅよー。
お嬢ちゃん、『底上げ』の方はどうする？」
『資本企業』の広告代理店に雇われている
国際競技広報部門マネージャー
アリシア＝スラピージョーズ
「スポンサー様も見ています。先頭グループを目指してください」
テクノピックの裏で暗躍する謎の組織の指揮官
ラミール＝スコッフロー
「祭典に栄光あれ」


name / Mariydi=Whitewitch
age / 12
sex / female
place of birth / unknown
weight / 37kg
body size / 74.53.72(cm)
height / 1.42m
eye color / brown
hair color / blond
belong / PMC airforce SKYBLUE.inc
post / pilot
CLEAR SNIPE
PMC airforce SKYBLUE.inc

オブジェクトの登場で、すでに役目を終えた兵器と言われているが、
私はそんなもの信じない。
どれだけ窮屈だろうが、大空は常にそこに広がっているんだ。

――とある『北欧禁猟区』の戦闘機乗りのつぶやき

HEAVY OBJECT

PURGE OF TECHNOPICS

ヘヴィーオブジェクト
死の祭典

鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI

Prologue

This is Monica, your battlefield idol reporter who can both sing and kill!

Oh, but this is different from my normal fare. We have no interest in clean battlefields today. There will be Objects, though. The opening ceremony parade should be quite a sight.

Yes, this is the summer games of the Technopics, that worldwide sports festival held every four years!!

I have arrived at Olympia Dome, the giant man-made island floating in the Atlantic Ocean that is the site of the games. The Legitimacy Kingdom, Information Alliance, Capitalist Corporations, and Faith Organization that normally fight it out on the battlefield will be gathering here to create a singular atmosphere that is overflowing with sportsmanship!!

...If only they could always be like this.

Oh, right, right. I will now interview some of the people entering Olympia Dome. Let's start with the type of celebrity that comes to watch peaceful sports matches between warring nations! Yes, you over there! I would like to speak with you!!

With the Technopics beginning safely once more, what event are you looking forward to the most?

...What? No, not that. Could you answer my ques— ...Eh? You think this is not a sports festival but a proxy war fought by the

athletes from the different nations? You think human engineering moving from developing the clothes and shoes of the athletes to developing the athletes themselves has turned this into nothing more than a technological presentation by the different world powers that are powerful enough to own several Objects? Could you just answer my quest— ...What? You work for a textile corporation and you are only here to search for a military business partner? I didn't ask about that!!

Ahem.

Umm, there might be some people here on business related to war, but the Technopics is basically – basically!! – a peaceful festival! It is not a festival of death in any way shape or form!!

Okay, let's get back on track by speaking to that parent and child over there!

Excuse me!!

Chapter 1

Part 1

A familiar electronic tone rang throughout the athlete locker room.

"Day 1 of the shootathlon begins in thirty minutes. All participants are to complete their preparations and stand by. I repeat, Day 1 of the shootathlon begins..."

When she heard that gentle female voice, Mariydi Whitewitch gave an annoyed sigh.

She was a 12 year old girl from the Capitalist Corporations. Her long blonde hair and her white skin were her primary characteristics, but the outfit she was wearing would likely draw more attention. She wore a special skintight suit that covered her from just below the neck all the way to the very tips of her toes. It was brightly colored in yellow and black. As befitting someone from the Capitalist Corporations, it had the names of various sponsors printed across it. She looked a bit like a hornet that had transformed into a race queen.

One might think it was the uniform for the shootathlon event, but that was not accurate.

It was actually the flight jacket from the PMC air force she belonged to.

"What the hell? I always thought this thing was weird, but I can't believe it fits in perfectly among the outfits that are designed for a show."

"It was designed for an air force. Other than if you crash, is there really any need to insist on proper camouflage?"

That composed response came from a woman holding a handheld device.

Her name was Alicia Sloppyjoes.

Sportswear, shoes, rifle, dietary restrictions, training coordination, bodyguard... Many, many people surrounded a single athlete like rings around Saturn. Alicia was the international sports PR manager sent by an advertising firm. She coordinated the connections between those several dozen rings of Saturn and Saturn itself.

However, Alicia was not Mariydi's obedient servant.

"So it's a nice message telling us we should die if we do crash," commented Mariydi

"How should I know? I have no connection to the military. If you want mental help, speak with the sports counselor. If you want to chat, you will have to pay me extra."

"That's the Capitalist Corporations for you."

"I could say the same to you, Miss PMC Air Force Mercenary."

Mariydi clicked her tongue in annoyance.

"Let me go over this once more," said the woman in the suit that made it look like she would never have anything to do with a marriage. "The shootathlon is a marksmanship event. You are to use the new rifle from your sponsor company Clear Snipe and earn excellent results in the event."

"It's basically a variation on the triathlon, right? You run and shoot, you swim and shoot, and you bike and shoot. Since each stage is on a different day, it's easier than it used to be."

"The first day has you running 25 kilometers and stopping for long-distance sharpshooting three times along the way. The targets will be human-shaped and flying disks. The end score is an average of your scores from each day, so be on your best game from the beginning."

"Yes, yes." Mariydi waved her hand while sitting on a bench. " You went to the effort of calling in not just a soldier but one from the long, drawn-out battles in the Northern European Restricted Zone where the use of Objects is not allowed. You want me to immaturely stand up to these peaceful athletes with my killer techniques."

"Unlike the old international sports festival, the Technopics also effectively functions as a technological race between the world powers. It is best to think of the athletes as enemy soldiers in a proxy war."

"Heh." Mariydi gave a small laugh. "Those are enemy soldiers? It must be nice having a sheltered upbringing away from real war."

"We have no reason to know about real war." Alicia's expression did not change in the slightest. "In these events, we are allowed to use air resistance alleviating technology in the sportswear, shock absorption technology in the shoes, non-conductive fiber springs, and as much doping as is legal for civilians. ...All of your enemies are athletes specially developed for this event."

"And I've had the inside of my body altered as a test subject in survivability experiments for the Elites that pilot Objects. I am well aware that I am as abnormal as any of them."

"And are you also aware that you will be forced to pay a fine for being in breach of contract if your results do not live up to the level expected of you by your sponsor?"

"I know that." Mariydi stretched her hand out a bit. "Hand over the sponsor's precious new rifle. I want to perform some final adjustments. As long as it isn't loaded, I can carry it outside the event grounds, right?"

Alicia casually glanced over.

When she did, the man who was Mariydi's bodyguard handed the girl a silver case.

"Be careful."

"Do I really look stupid enough to stare down the barrel if it jams?"

"That isn't what I meant." The bodyguard shook his head. "As that icy lady said, the Technopics is a proxy war based on a technology race. You will find no concept of fairness or sportsmanship here. Everyone here will do whatever it takes to win. We must ensure the safety of the money we have invested in sending you out to compete, but we cannot remain by your side during the event itself. If your results are too good, others may focus their attacks on you as a type of 'countermeasure'."

"I suppose that is especially true for an event like the shootathlon that's results are based on three events over three days ." Mariydi disassembled the rifle so quickly it was clear she was used to doing so. "But that also means I'm free to do the same, right?"

Standing up perfectly straight, Alicia answered the question with a serious expression.

"On the surface, this is viewed as a peaceful festival. You are free to do so as long as you do not sully the image of the sponsor's rifle."

"Heh. The management of Olympia Dome officially condemns it, but every single spectator sees such trouble as one aspect of what makes the Technopics enjoyable. That is why it is commonly known as the Festival of Death or the Massacre Parade."

As she continued her work, Mariydi glanced over at her bodyguard.

Even in that age, certain things were not allowed in sports competitions. Those included doping beyond a certain level, physical training that was too harsh, and special sportswear that included springs and motors powerful enough that they would likely damage the athlete's body. While human technology had invented such things, they very rarely saw the light of day.

But even if something seemed like it would be banned in sports competitions, it would not be banned if it could be used in other fields.

For example, the military.

For that reason, the participants in the Technopics were commonly referred to as athlete soldiers.

"I'll be out there with 30 or 40 of those man-made machos. I assume you have some kind of protection strategy for if they cause some trouble."

"This would be a lot easier if Objects could handle situations like this."

Athlete soldiers primarily had abilities as individuals, but they could also break previous limits in physical strength when using weapons like powered suits.

But at the same time, the abundance of Objects in the world meant a fighter pilot for a PMC air force like Mariydi was only useful in a very limited environment.

She could only defend or attack areas where Objects could not be used.

(We're both types of soldiers that are not needed in this era of clean wars.)

With that self-deprecating comment in her heart, a new figure entered the locker room.

It was a woman wearing a white coat over a brand name track suit. She had short, slightly wavy, brown hair and wore frameless glasses. However, the biggest clue to her true colors was the large cooler hanging from her shoulder.

Her name was Stacy Palmetto.

She was a pharmacist that specialized in the techniques known commonly as doping.

"Hi, there. It's time for the scary injection! Young lady, how would you like to improve yourself today?"

"Just a time-delayed transfusion is fine. I don't need any unnecessary drugs."

A time-delayed transfusion was receiving a transfusion of your own blood.

Humans created blood every day. A few days after blood was drawn, your blood level would be back up to 100%. If that drawn blood was saved and then given as a transfusion, you could have a blood level of more than 100%.

Blood carried the role of carrying oxygen throughout the body, so the more blood you had, the more oxygen you could store. This could be used to raise an athlete's score in an event.

Stacy pouted her lips.

"Chehh. You aren't going to use muscle builders or sedatives? I have plenty of varieties that can help keep your hand steady when you aim."

"After looking into the average lifespan of Technopic athletes, I would really prefer not to use them."

"Boo, boo. I say it's all the assassinations that bring the average lifespan figures down."

As Stacy continued pouting, Alicia replied while still standing perfectly straight.

"Her participation in the shootathlon is meant to show off the abilities of the sponsor's new rifle. Please avoid any elements other than the gun that might raise her marksmanship ability."

"There you have it," said Mariydi. "Also, even if these drugs are perfectly safe, anything that suppresses your fatigue makes it more difficult to keep track of the condition your body is in. That could have some slight negative effect on my aim."

"You say you won't use the chemical drugs, but do you really think time-delayed transfusions are kind to your body?" Stacy pulled a tube and a pack full of blood from the large cooler. " Raising your level of blood above normal means your blood pressure shoots up. The effects of that can wear down your stamina. Especially in a long race. Do not forget the risk of applying a tremendous burden to your blood vessels just by attempting to run according to your normal pace."

"That sounds harsh," muttered the bodyguard with his arms crossed.

Mariydi removed the elbow-length glove-like part of her full body flight jacket.

As he watched the needle for the transfusion pierce her youthful skin, the bodyguard continued speaking.

"All the athletes have their bodies thoroughly strengthened daily with various drugs and their sportswear and shoes are carefully designed, yet it all has to be prepared before the event. It

seems to me they could just mix the necessary ingredients into the drinks here."

"This is a sport, remember? There is no logical or convincing explanation as to why you cannot use your hands in soccer. You can only say that those are the rules."

"It is almost time," said Alicia as she turned over her slender wrist to look at an oddly small watch.

Mariydi looked over at the tube sticking into her arm, rested the rifle on her other shoulder, and let out a sigh.

"Okay, time to appear in the world's largest commercial."

Part 2

The Technopics were held in Olympia Dome, a giant man-made island floating in almost the very center of the Atlantic Ocean.

The man-made island was not created by filling in land to expand an already existing natural island. It was instead created entirely out of giant floats. When a man-made island was given independence, it was not required to stay in one single place. Most of those islands slowly followed the currents through international waters on the seven seas.

Due to global warming and rising sea levels, there had been a temporary rush to create that kind of man-made island. Weixing Taiwan, Second Venice, and the New Ryukyu Islands were good examples. However, their maintenance costs were unexpectedly

high, their diplomatic situation was fragile as they required resources to be shipped in from the continents, and the recovery speed of city functions after an emergency was quite low. These problems were all discovered after their creation and so they had gone out of fashion.

Olympia Dome had a giant dome 20 kilometers across as the main central stadium. The 10 kilometers around it contained the harbor, airport, lodging facilities, and everything else required for the island to function. For this reason, its shape was often likened to a fried egg.

That giant fried egg circulated around the Atlantic Ocean with a cycle of about 2 years.

Mariydi and the other participants in the women's shootathlon were gathered at one end of the circular dome. The event for the first day was to run for 25 kilometers along the wall while stopping at 3 places along the way to perform sharpshooting.

She could hear Alicia's sharp voice over a pen-cap-sized piezoelectric receiver attached to her ear.

"The final results of the shootathlon are based on an average of the scores from the three days, but your results on the first day determine your starting point on the second day. To be blunt, the better a lead you gain here, the easier things will be later."

"We're running 20 or 30 kilometers, so I don't think starting a dozen meters or so back is going to make that much of a difference ," replied Mariydi in annoyance. "Also, the shootathlon is about shooting as well as running."

She glanced around and estimated there were over 100 female athletes gathered. The starting line looked like it had a higher population density than the entrance to a department store before a big sale.

Capitalist Corporations, Information Alliance, Legitimacy Kingdom, Faith Organization.

It was a strange feeling to have so many people from different world powers gathered in one place.

Some of the uniforms were full-body suits like Mariydi's, but more standard running outfits with a separate top and bottom were common as well. Some wore large boots that extended all the way up to the thighs. Those seemed ill suited for running at first glance, but they likely contained fiber springs that thoroughly increased the wearer's leg strength.

The great amount of variation was likely due to the fact that these were women's uniforms. From a moral standpoint, women's uniforms had to cover more of the body which made them harder to optimize than men's uniforms.

However, this provided a more florid visual display and the designers went beyond simple athletic ability and designed the

uniforms to have sex appeal as a form of advertisement. (The sponsor companies' names were printed on the uniforms.) In some ways, this almost seemed to actually work against the original purpose of the uniforms.

A female announcer's voice cut in on all of their piezoelectric receivers.

"Day one of the women's shootathlon begins in ten minutes. All participants are to move to their marks."

(If they're going to divide it up by sex, I wish they would divide it up by age, too.)

Perhaps in an attempt to apply pressure, a nearby older Information Alliance woman half-jokingly aimed her rifle at Mariydi. Mariydi ignored her and walked a few meters to the left. As the other woman moved along while peering through her scope, she did not realize she had walked right in front of a camera .

That was just how sports were.

Regulars on the same team would constantly try to trip each other up and athletes would taunt each other in what they called psychological attacks. Mariydi wanted to vomit every time she heard someone use the word "sportsmanship". She felt the soldiers on the battlefield who silently exchanged fire were much more sincere.

She then heard an ally's voice come in over the piezoelectric receiver on her ear.

It was from the pharmacist named Stacy.

"If you have the time, get an autograph for me. I hear Erie Greenhat's is quite valuable."

"I didn't take you for the type to follow the current fads. As an athletics expert, I would have thought you would be used to being around athletes."

"I find more value in my job if I have a personal objective in it. A collector's spirit works well for that."

The bodyguard must have been listening in from next to Stacy, because he cut in.

"Do you have one from our prized athlete yet? If not, she might get a little sulky."

"I will get one from Mariydi-chan once she proves herself with some results."

"Say whatever you like," spat out Mariydi.

Meanwhile, the time drew near.

"One more minute."

She listened to the announcement with a yawn.

Soon thereafter, the starter pistol was fired.

The large group began running all at once like water flowing out of a container that had its cap removed. Mariydi went with that flow. Mariydi moved her legs in a rhythm as she felt a tension unlike that of an all-out sprint. It felt more like attempting to stop a stopwatch at exactly 10 seconds without looking.

She heard Alicia's stiff voice over her piezoelectric receiver.

"Your sponsor is watching. Please keep within the leading group."

"Are you stupid?"

Mariydi gave no explanation for her short response.

She could have rushed up into first place, but doing so was meaningless.

(Dammit. This reminds me of my training in the Northern European Restricted Zone when they had us running around the base again and again and again before we were given any breakfast.)

Her 12 year old appearance made it hard to imagine, but Mariydi was actually a fighter pilot. A pilot had to be able to precisely operate her aircraft while experiencing pressures over 9 times that of Earth's gravity, so she had needed a body tougher than that of a foot soldier who carried a gun through the hills.

The main difference between the race and her training was that she could not simply match the others' pace.

The trick was to keep her own pace the entire time. To continue with the stopwatch example, she had to continue to trust her internal clock while ignoring the surrounding noise. If she did not do that, her stamina would not last.

As such, she had to be aware of the movements of those around her while at the same time ensuring that she did not begin moving more quickly as she was drawn into their pace.

"All the jiggling going on around you is kind of pissing me off."

"Unless you're going to help me keep my pace, I'm going to cut off your transmission," replied Mariydi.

"That sort of thing can actually be used to gather focus from the cameras. Now, we can't expect that from you, but you may be able to use a different tactic. In addition to simply getting good results, I suggest you create some drama."

"You mean like pretending to be suffering?"

"This is the Technopics. Gaining 10 seconds of coverage on a single station is the same as a 30,000 dollar advertisement. And each place you move up in the ranks is another 30%."

"I would be quite the laughingstock if I thought too much about that and ended up falling down in the ranks."

Eighteen minutes passed as she chatted.

As she arrived at the first shooting point, Mariydi's breathing was as regulated as if she was speaking on the phone in a café.

The point was located 7 kilometers from the starting line. A carpet several dozen meters long was spread out across the asphalt . A line of human-shaped targets was set up parallel to but 200 meters away from the carpet. The targets were set up on metal rails and moved about randomly.

The shooting point doubled as a water stop.

The athletes in the leading group had already grabbed their own drinks and were lying prone atop the carpet while holding their sniper rifles.

Mariydi glanced over at them and said, "How elegant. Are they enjoying a vacation?"

She remained standing.

She held up her sniper rifle while continuing to run at the same speed as the rest of the race.

Instead of holding her breath and firing one shot at a time, she pulled the trigger again and again in semi-auto mode.

A string of gunshots rang out.

Mariydi Whitewitch accurately fired a bullet through the head and chest of every single human-shaped target.

Her hands were so steady because of the stamina she had preserved over the first leg of the race with the intentional regulation of her pace.

However, her simple skill as a sharpshooter also played a large role.

"That should do it."

As the other athletes looked on in shock, Mariydi continued on to the next leg of the race without taking a drink.

"That managed to draw a lot of attention," said Alicia.

However, she was not praising Mariydi.

"But that left it unclear whether it was due to the abilities of your sponsor's new rifle or your personal skill. Try not to go too far overboard from now on."

"Is that really how you cheer on the athlete that just rushed up to first place in an international sporting event?"

Mariydi sounded annoyed, but her pace did not change.

The old leading group was approaching with incredible force, but Mariydi did not up her pace in an attempt to keep them from overtaking her. Their efforts would only wear down their stamina and lower their shooting accuracy. They would not defeat her in the overall score.

In fact, Mariydi's lead had made the old leading group destroy their pace and that would also likely make the others behind them wear down their stamina as well, so it all worked to Mariydi's advantage.

(They're sure to have their trainers and managers yelling at them over their piezoelectric receivers, but that isn't enough to get your heart rate under control.)

"I'm glad they're all so stupid. I guess this really is just a gathering of muscle-obsessed freaks."

Mariydi was overtaken as she muttered that, but her expression did not change one bit.

She was in the best area.

Any lower and a good result would be out of reach. Any higher and she would run out of stamina and lose speed.

Without letting the apparent order lead her astray, Mariydi Whitewitch continued on towards an assured top-level score.

Part 3

In the end, she made 4th place.

That was towards the upper end for the first day.

As a holdover from the old international sports competition, the Technopics gave medals to those in the top three spots. For that reason, there was a large gap in value between 3rd place and 4th place.

"After all your boasting, you failed to end up in the top group," said Alicia while standing tall as Mariydi returned to her locker room. "Your sponsor is lenient, so they may simply overlook this, but be more careful next time."

"I purposefully gave up a top spot. For today."

"?"

"The shootathlon scores are taken from an average of all 3 days. If I had gone all out and stuck with the medal group today, the risk of the others focusing their interference on me in the second day increases. It's simpler to give up the top spot now and wait for those in the top spots to fall down."

"I see you thought this through," said her bodyguard with a smile. "That doesn't sound like the thinking of a soldier brought in from outside. You're used to this. Comments like that show you know what people are expecting when they watch the Technopics. "

"Our goal here is to advertise the sponsor's new rifle. Making things easier for yourself is irrelevant," said Alicia while still standing tall.

The bodyguard looked at her in amusement and asked, “Have you ever smiled?”

“I supply a superb smile when entertaining sponsors.”

“So your smile is for sale, too?” muttered Mariydi. “Anyway, if you have nothing else to discuss with me, I’d like to take a shower. ”

“Wait, wait!” interrupted Stacy the pharmacist. “Can I take some samples to check for doping now? Otherwise the sweat can be a pain to get.”

“What else do you need?”

“Hair, saliva, blood, urine.”

As Stacy enumerated the various samples, Mariydi scratched through her hair with one hand. She preferred to deal with that kind of annoying thing after she had a chance to wash away her sticky sweat.

Stacy then held out a paper cup while trying to suppress a smile .

“Young lady, do you need me to help by holding one leg up from behind?”

“Shut up.”

Mariydi’s face reddened a bit and she grabbed the cup. The bodyguard watched on with a confused look.

"The rules on doping have been relaxed quite a bit, so is there really any reason for a detailed examination after the event?"

"This is not meant to restrict anything. It is just checking to make sure she is not using anything more than what she registered before the event. Mixing any kind of drug into the drinks during the event is banned."

As she spoke, Stacy placed a large tag-like sheet on top of Mariydi's tongue, removed the long glove-like part of her flight jacket, and attached something like tape to her elbow. The tape was not retrieving sweat; it was retrieving blood from her capillaries.

She then used a cotton ball held by tweezers to absorb some sweat from around her neck and pulled out a single golden hair.

As this process was performed on her, Mariydi spoke to the bodyguard.

"Now that I have entered the group with a chance at victory, you should assume the other athletes and their supporters will try to interfere. From here on out, the true face of the athlete soldier will show itself."

"I will do my very best to protect you as long as my pay is enough to cover what that entails."

The instant after the bodyguard made that promise, the lights in the locker room shut off and they were wrapped in darkness.

Mariydi Whitewitch did not just look up at the lights on the ceiling. This was not a power outage caused by lightning. Her bodyguard did not need to push her to the floor. She immediately grabbed the long glove-like part of her suit sitting on the bench and jumped to the floor herself.

Repeated high-pitched explosive noises and flashes of lights came in through the slightly-cracked door.

This was much worse for the heart than lightning.

“Gunfire… Looks like the welcome party has begun already!!” said Mariydi as she reattached the glove-like part of her suit.

“But it doesn’t look like this one is for us,” said the bodyguard.

The lights had indeed gone out and the gunfire was still continuing, but no attackers had charged into Mariydi’s room and no bullets were flying into the room.

Alicia was likely still standing tall in the darkness as she said, “ The power for the athlete locker rooms are separated by block. Our power was likely taken out as a side effect of taking out their target ’s power.”

“Well, this kind of thing is common at the Technopics,” said the pharmacist Stacy who was the calmest of them all as she was used to this type of competition.

Still on the floor, Mariydi started crawling towards the door that was the only exit.

Her bodyguard immediately asked, “What are you doing?”

“Can you see in this darkness?”

“Thanks to the sensors on my rifle.”

“Then come with me.”

Mariydi pressed up against the wall next to the door. She had received training on how to let her eyes adjust to the darkness, but the repeated muzzle flashes were making it take longer than she had expected. Complete darkness would have been preferable.

After she heard loud footsteps head past the door, Mariydi peered out of the open door and into the passageway.

The passageway had doors leading to identical locker rooms lined up along it. Three doors down from Mariydi’s room, several men were gathered. She could tell they were firing their guns into the room.

Due to the darkness, she could only see the outlines of the attackers when they fired. Mariydi paid special attention to the guns the attackers held.

(Those are semi-auto shotguns with a 9mm full-auto machine handgun forcibly attached to the bottom of the barrel. That’s a Legitimacy Kingdom-style indoor suppression weapon. The shotgun is used to destroy walls or doors to secure an invasion route, and a spray of 9mm bullets is used to kill the target.)

"Damn. The afterimage is burned into my eyes," muttered Mariydi as she pulled her head back into the room and leaned up against the wall next to the door. "Who's in the room three to the right of here?"

"Erie Greenhat of the Information Alliance's Chesapeake district."

"She's the one that got the top spot in the first day of the shootathlon. Any idea why people with Legitimacy Kingdom equipment would be attacking her?"

"A Legitimacy Kingdom athlete finished the first day in 13th place. The odds of her making it into the top 3 no matter how well she does in the next two days are almost nonexistent, but she could have a chance if those in the top positions are taken out of the running."

(Well, there are other people who would want the top person taken out of the running. And there's no guarantee that they would simply use their own equipment for the attack. We don't have enough information to know for sure who these attackers are.)

Gunfire rang out.

However, this was different from the previous gunfire. These gunshots were deeper. It was likely coming from Information Alliance assault rifles.

(…But they're at the disadvantage.)

"Get away from the door," said the bodyguard. "The attackers are only after Erie Greenhat of the Information Alliance. As you predicted, the top competitor is being targeted. If we don't make any stupid moves, we won't get wrapped up in this. Look. This passageway is lined with locker rooms like a student apartment building. Each of the athletes in those locker rooms has a bodyguard force, but none of them are coming out. Coming out would just lead to everyone fighting amongst themselves, so they have all been told to stay uninvolved. That's just how things work here."

"…Can we really be so relaxed about this?" Mariydi cracked the door once more and looked out into the passageway. "The closest exit from this building is the back exit right next to the locker room currently being attacked. It's a long way out of our way to any other exit. Our escape has been cut off. If this battle falls into further confusion, we could get caught up in the firefight."

"We do not need to get out," said Alicia. "Each athlete locker room has a small shelter prepared inside. They are covered in 80 cm of composite armor, so they can withstand 2 or 3 shots from a smoothbore tank gun."

"Do you really believe in that myth of safety? If it was true, the Information Alliance bodyguards wouldn't be putting up such a fight," said Mariydi with a cynical smile. "The ducts present a major issue."

"The ducts are only 20 cm across. I do not see how an attacker could climb in through one. Also, the ducts take a complicated series of bends so a grenade cannot reach the shelter even if it is thrown in."

"But as long as there is a path in for air, explosive blasts and shockwaves can get through. It's the same principle as with a ship's speaking tube or a stethoscope. And when the shockwave passes through the duct and to the shelter, the pressure will crush the organs of any human within. …I'm sure my bodyguard could explain it in more detail."

When the bodyguard was mentioned, a sigh could be heard in the darkness.

"Well, that would be why the Information Alliance bodyguards are working so hard to defend the locker room. The duct coming from the shelter only connects there."

"That does not matter," replied Alicia immediately. "The attackers are only after Erie Greenhat. There may be a risk of being hit by a stray bullet, but they have no reason to persistently target us after we flee into the shelter. I recommend we hurry up and get to the shelter."

"You can go hide there alone if you want."

"It will not open without your fingerprint and retina data. That ensures the attackers cannot force it open. And the emergency power for the lock is contained within the shelter itself."

"Alicia, do you have life insurance?"

"I have the Platinum Course from the Blue Area Company."

"Then you're in luck. Their payment for dying in an international terrorist attack is more than you could ever hope to earn in a lifetime. From a Capitalist Corporations point of view, that's quite a wonderful way to die."

"I only have it to help with hospitalization as I have no partner for the payment to go to when I die."

"…That isn't something to say with pride," muttered Mariydi. " Also, there is no reason for the attackers to stick with Greenhat of the Information Alliance. They're just trying to move their athlete up in the ranks, remember? If they have too much trouble with attacking Greenhat, they could always change their target to someone else higher in the ranks. …Like me in 4th place."

"Enough excuses," interrupted Alicia as she stood tall. "You are trying to find something to convince us. Personally, you are enraged at the attack on Erie Greenhat. In a way, you are trying to head back into the danger you avoided because Greenhat is a civilian. Am I wrong?"

"…"

"The Technopics being held here in Olympia Dome are a presentation of the technology race between the Capitalist Corporations, the Information Alliance, the Legitimacy Kingdom, and the Faith Organization, as well as a proxy war to let the people

of those world powers vent their nationalistic anger. Participating as a representative of your nation is no different from being sent off to the battlefield in an Object like a pilot Elite. It said precisely that on the contract you signed, did it not?"

A military Elite and a representative athlete both had the same technology used to develop their bodies.

The only difference was whether they used an Object or not.

For that reason, the Technopics were often viewed as a war in a different form.

But…

"…The athletes are the same as soldiers, hm?" Mariydi gave a mocking smile. "These people who donate to war victims based on how many medals they win? These people who truly think that will bring happiness to the world? …Ridiculous. Only people who have never seen true war could think that."

"Just like Miss Alicia, I disagree with you," said the bodyguard. "Erie Greenhat's situation is not the issue here. My job is to protect you, so I have no reason to protect any other athlete. I get charged for breach of contract even if you run out on your own and get hurt, so this is scaring me."

"I see." Mariydi checked over the handgun in her hand with practiced movements. "Then I'll just be borrowing this."

"Hm? Hey, wait a second! When did you pull that from my holster!?"

"I don't really care either way." Stacy must have experienced this kind of thing in the past because she was the only one that did not seem particularly bothered by the situation. "But only if I get to sell you something. How about you use a muscle builder before charging out into that gunfire? I also have painkillers and anxiolytics."

"Give me some normal bandages and disinfectant."

With that request, Mariydi peered out into the passageway with the handgun in one hand.

The familiar scent of gunfire wafted her way.

It was the scent of the non-clean battlefields that were not left to Objects.

"Now then, it's time to taste the true thrill of this peaceful festival."

Part 4

The passageway ran in a straight line and Erie Greenhat's athlete locker room was located at a corner of the passageway. The back door was also near that corner, but anyone who tried to make a run for it would be turned to Swiss cheese by the 5 or 6 attackers.

The distance from Mariydi's door to the attackers was about 30 meters.

(What idiots. They're so focused on Greenhat's locker room that they're leaving their backs wide open.)

And she had no reason to hold back.

Mariydi leaned out from the door and relentlessly pulled the handgun's trigger.

Gunshots rang out and about three of the attackers collapsed. The remaining Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers frantically dashed around the corner to avoid the bullets, but Mariydi kept up the attack.

She darted out the door and ran down the passageway.

Before the attackers could poke their heads out once more, Mariydi arrived at the corner they were using for cover.

(If there is nothing but another straight passageway around the corner, they won't have much to use for cover. If I keep firing while they are lost in confusion, I can finish this all at once!!)

But in the next instant, she heard a metallic noise come from the side.

It was coming from Erie Greenhat's locker room.

"!!"

Mariydi immediately dove to the ground and assault rifle fire swept across at about waist height in the next instant. Bullets flew from the broken door and struck the opposite wall of the passageway causing sparks to fly.

At first, Mariydi thought a Legitimacy Kingdom attacker that had made it within the locker room had fired.

But she was wrong.

(Those are Greenhat's Information Alliance bodyguards!!)

But that was their standard job. Mariydi was the one stepping out of the normal bounds and she did not exactly have the time to give a leisurely explanation. It was only natural for them to think she was another enemy.

In other words, this was the type of job that was simply not worth doing. The same as she had experienced so many times in the Northern European Restricted Zone.

The Information Alliance men turned their sights on Mariydi once more, but they did not pull the trigger.

Mariydi's bodyguard who had chased after her fired a short burst of rifle bullets into the locker room as warning shots while shouting at the other bodyguards.

"You useless bastards! Even if you can't protect your client, at least don't get in the way!!"

"Oh, so you came with me?"

"I demanded Miss Alicia pay me extra for this, but she refused."

As they spoke, the two began their next action.

The enemy would be around the corner of the passageway. It would not be difficult to finish off the attackers while they had little cover and were panicking. With that in mind, Mariydi and the bodyguard poked as little of themselves around the corner as possible and fired.

But the remaining attackers were not left sinking into puddles of blood.

The bullets ricocheted away with orange sparks flying.

An 8-wheeled armored vehicle had crashed through the thin external wall and acted as a shield for the attackers.

"Tch. Another Legitimacy Kingdom brand! Why do they even have one of these on Olympia Dome!?"

"They could probably get an application approved if they said it was to safely transport the athlete. Even with that 30mm autocannon installed!!"

Just as the two of them frantically ducked back around the corner of the passageway, the autocannon installed on the top of its roof let out an explosive roar.

Mariydi tackled the bodyguard to the ground just before the corner they had been using as cover was smashed to pieces.

"We need to fall back! An assault rifle isn't enough to shoot through that armor!!"

Mariydi grabbed various pieces of gear from the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers she had shot with the handgun before and then ran down the straight passageway. The bodyguard followed behind her.

The passageways for the athlete locker rooms were laid out in a grid pattern and the rooms themselves were arranged in 2x5 blocks of 10 rooms. Mariydi and the bodyguard circled around the block to reach another corner to escape the autocannon fire.

"It isn't pursuing us."

"Their top priority is Erie Greenhat. They probably want to finish this before Olympia Dome 'intercedes'."

The armored vehicle had thinner armor than a tank, so it could be penetrated with the explosives or shells small enough for a foot

soldier to use. They may have feared a trap if they followed enemy soldiers around a corner.

But then, this was not a target that Mariydi and the bodyguard absolutely had to defeat.

The bodyguard asked, “What do we do? If it uses that 30mm autocannon, they will take control of Erie Greenhat’s locker room in no time at all.”

“We blow up that armored vehicle of course. And we even have something we can use to do so,” said Mariydi as she took the equipment she had taken from the dead soldiers and laid it out on the ground.

She had a handgun, a semi-auto shotgun, a grenade launcher, and…

“Propeller-style RPG warheads.”

“The honor student of anti-armor weapons. And that armored vehicle did not have explosive reactive armor.”

“But these are just the warheads. They’re just the part on the end that explodes. They need the propellant to be fired like an arrow.”

That type of weapon came in several different types, but this was the type that required a launcher that one held over one’s

shoulder and two 30cm stick-shaped propulsion attachments in addition to the warhead. In other words, it would not fly without those sticks.

"It doesn't have to fly. Its fuse is pressure activated. It will detonate when something impacts the end. It will detonate if we pull out the safety pin and throw it."

"You mean you're going to go stand in front of that 30mm autocannon?" The bodyguard frowned. "How far can you throw it by hand? The passageway ceiling is low, so you can't throw it in a long arc like a long throw in baseball. Also, the warhead is not round like a ball."

"True. Thirty meters is probably the limit by hand."

"Oh, c'mon. You'll be blown away if you just poke your head around the corner at that range. And it won't just be the part you stick around the corner that gets blown away. The entire wall around you will be blown to pieces. In and of itself, I don't care if you go off and die, but I have to keep you from leaving me in breach of contract."

"That just means we have to use a different method."

(…It's about 750 grams.)

Mariydi grabbed one of the warhead that were shaped like slim rugby balls to check on its weight.

"I'll be borrowing your rifle."

"Please don't swipe my weapons anymore."

"Just hand it over. Oh, and take apart some bullets to make some blanks," said Mariydi causing the bodyguard to frown. "A blank won't fire an actual bullet, but everything else is the same as a real bullet. It produces the combustion gas from the gunpowder and the energy that pushes the bullet out is still there. In other words, if a blank is fired while the RPG warhead is affixed to the rifle barrel, it can be fired further than is possible by hand."

A screw-like protrusion meant for the stick-shaped propulsion attachments stuck out of the bottom of the RPG warhead. It could be affixed to the rifle by sticking that down the barrel.

If a real bullet was used, the warhead would be destroyed while still attached to the barrel. That was why a blank was needed.

"This method was used in the old wars before Objects. But it puts a lot of stress on the rifles, so the firearm companies didn't like it much."

"What range can you get using that?"

"With a high-angle trajectory like a long throw in baseball, two to three hundred meters."

"Did you forget we're stuck in a narrow passageway?"

"The locker room building is a large one-story building. And a portion of the ceiling was destroyed along with the wall when the armored vehicle crashed in. There is a large hole right above the

target. That means we can get a direct hit if we fire the warhead out of one hole in the ceiling, through the sky, and back down through the second hole above the armored vehicle. Right?"

"The armored vehicle may have opened that second hole, but where is this first one?" asked the bodyguard.

Mariydi grabbed the military semi-auto shotgun from the spoils of war she had lined up on the floor. She aimed it upwards and pulled the trigger repeatedly.

A roar that reverberated in the gut rang out and a 1 meter square hole opened up in the ceiling.

"Done."

"You people from the Northern European Restricted Zone don't take no for an answer, do you? Here are your blanks."

Mariydi took a few blank cartridges from the bodyguard and handed him the sensors and scope she had removed from the rifle.

"You can use the scope as a monitor for the electronic sensors. Set it up at the corner of the passageway. Stick just the sensors and camera out to safely keep an eye on the armored vehicle."

"…You aren't going to make this easy for me, are you?"

"I don't have a radio, so we will communicate using the flashing of our lights."

"At least give me a weapon to replace the rifle."

The bodyguard grabbed the shotgun Mariydi had just used and ran off into the dark passageway. Meanwhile, Mariydi lined up the five RPG warheads at her feet.

After a bit, a white light flashed down the passageway.

"The armored vehicle is stopped in the same place as before."

With that confirmation, Mariydi aimed the rifle straight up with an RPG warhead attached to the end. She pulled out the safety pin on the end of the warhead, looked up at the large hole in the ceiling, and carefully pulled the trigger.

A muffled gunshot rang out and the RPG warhead flew through the night sky like a long throw in baseball.

After about 5 seconds, a vibration and explosive roar shook the entire building.

The light down the dark passageway flashed once more.

"You missed! It did not fall right on the hole above the armored vehicle. You only blew up the ceiling in a completely different place!!"

"This is a high-angle trajectory shot. The wind, temperature, humidity, and path of the combustion gas can cause errors in where it lands. I never thought I would hit with the first one," said Mariydi in a code that used quick flashes of her light. "Where did that first shot land?"

"What?"

"Tell me exactly where the first shot landed! Then I can finish this!!"

"It landed 5 meters south of the armored vehicle!! That's past its location from our perspective. It hasn't moved! But what are you going to do!?"

Even with the representative of the high-angle trajectory, the mortar, the first shot almost never hit. The first shot was used as a basis for the calculations. The difference between the target and where it actually landed was calculated and the target was then aimed at after correcting for that difference.

Mariydi quickly loaded the next warhead in the rifle and aimed the barrel up.

(5 meters south, hm?)

She pulled the trigger and fired the warhead through the large hole and into the night sky.

"This one fell outside. It was most likely 3 meters to the northwest!! But that's just an estimation based on where the wall collapsed!"

She fired again.

"I can't see where it landed from here. But from the direction the dust is blowing in from, I would say 7 to 10 meters to the west! 7 meters to the west!! Dammit. The dust is blowing in on me!! Are you sure you can manage this!?"

"…I can, little boy," muttered Mariydi audibly without bothering to use the light.

She loaded the next warhead. The more data she had, the more accurately she could correct for the errors. For that reason, her failures were not going to waste.

And she fired that final shot.

The warhead was swallowed up by the night sky and accurately detonated after about 5 seconds.

This explosion sounded different. The sound was deeper and a flickering orange light faintly lit up the area down the passageway.

The armored vehicle's fuel had been ignited.

The bodyguard flashed his light back.

"The armored vehicle has been destroyed!!"

"You keep your gun aimed around that corner. I'll use a different route. If we fire from two directions into an L-bend of the passageway, we can finish this up all at once."

Part 5

The loss of the armored vehicle sealed the fate of the Legitimacy Kingdom attackers.

Mariydi used the rifle to shoot the ones who still tried to resist while the wiser ones fled outside using the broken outer wall.

The building's lights finally recovered.

Standing in the bright white light, the bodyguard asked, "What do we do now?"

"Nothing. If we pursue them, they may put up a desperate resistance," replied Mariydi as she returned the rifle and handgun to the bodyguard.

The passageway was soaking wet thanks to the sprinklers that had activated either due to the smoke from the blazing armored vehicle or due to the RPG, but the water was not actually reaching the area near the armored vehicle as the ceiling had collapsed there . Orange flames could still be seen flickering.

"How is Erie Greenhat of the Information Alliance?"

"…Not too good," replied the bodyguard as he peered through the broken door to the locker room.

A girl covered in blood lay collapsed in the middle of the room.

She looked to be in her late teens. Instead of a special suit that covered the full body like Mariydi's, she wore a standard running outfit with a separate top and bottom. This left her midriff visible, but a dark red hole could be seen on her side there.

A blood trail as if she had crawled led from the shelter farther back in the room.

Mariydi grimaced.

"…Was she shot before she made it into the shelter?"

"It wasn't with the shotgun. The Legitimacy Kingdom was using the shotgun for destroying obstacles and a machine handgun for people. She was likely hit with the 9mm. The bullet had its hardness increased with devitroceramics."

"So the bullet wasn't soft? Why?"

"To have them here, they must be for special missions. Killing may not be their only use. They may have been manufactured for capturing VIPs as well."

(So there may still be a chance of saving her.)

Mariydi spoke to the Information Alliance soldiers looking after Erie Greenhat.

"Did the bullet exit her?"

"Shut up. Just leave us alone!! We don't have time to chat. We'll accept your interference in the firefight, but don't interfere any further!!"

They neither thanked Mariydi nor apologized for when they had aimed at her.

But Mariydi had not expected them to do either. They were soldiers from a different world power. Their relationship did not go beyond killing one another for no real reason if they ran into each other on the battlefield. And so Mariydi let it slide.

"I asked you if the bullet exited her."

"So what if it did!? The bullet is no longer in her, but she's bleeding badly. The wound is large and we couldn't look after her while she was in the shelter, so she's lost a lot of blood already. Can't you see that we have no time to spare here!?"

"You can do more than simply holding a balled up cloth against the wound."

"…?"

The Information Alliance bodyguards looked confused and Mariydi pointed at the locker room bench. More specifically, she pointed at the large cooler bag sitting on it that contained doping equipment.

"She is a Technopic athlete, so she probably has blood prepared for a time-delayed transfusion. That blood is intended to increase

the amount of oxygen transported through the body by increasing the amount of blood, but can't it also be used to restore lost blood like a normal transfusion?"

Part 6

"I cannot believe you," muttered Alicia while standing tall.

She spoke to Mariydi as soon as the girl returned to her own locker room.

"This was the perfect opportunity to have someone higher than you in the ranks knocked out of the running without dirtying your hands, so why would you dirty your hands to destroy that opportunity? I simply cannot understand the thought process behind that."

"Either way, she won't be able to participate in the next two days of the event with that wound."

"Then why did you even get involved?" said Alicia as she checked on something using her handheld device. "Your unnecessary actions have only increased the risk of direct attack from the Legitimacy Kingdom or whoever was using their equipment. This could have a negative effect on the remaining days of the event. …Please be extra careful to ensure that the sponsor's new rifle is not given a bad image."

Mariydi gave a mischievous smile at that usual warning.

"Couldn't they sell their rifle based on some tragic story of its true abilities never being seen due to cowardly interference?"

"…We cannot have baseless rumors starting about how all of its users end up dead."

As Alicia simply could not take a joke, Mariydi Whitewitch ignored her and looked up towards the ceiling.

As the sportswear, shoes, and physical development used had progressed, that international sports competition had lost the sportsmanship it used to have.

It was now a technological race between the world powers as well as a proxy war that let the people vent their nationalistic frustrations.

The various types of interference carried out behind the scenes were tacitly seen as a part of the entertainment.

The Technopics being held on the giant manmade island of Olympia Dome would invite in even more blood and war.

Enemy Forces 1

A number of rental storehouses larger than a university lecture hall were lined up along the outermost edge on one side of the fried-egg-shaped Olympia Dome. They were not harbor facilities.

Instead, they were used to hold civilian helicopters. Olympia Dome was cruising in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, so the amount of helicopter fuel needed to reach a continent was not all that large. For safety reasons, the helicopters were only used when Olympia Dome was within 500 kilometers of a continent. For that reason, the facilities were almost entirely deserted given Olympia Dome's current location.

Yet even though the rental storehouses had no real use at present, around a dozen people were gathered in one.

They had large radio equipment and several monitors. They had firearms, explosives, and even armored vehicles. This was not simply a storage area for weaponry. The bentos and ready-made food packages scattered about made one suspect the people were living there for the moment.

One member, Iris Aggravation, turned around while using her supple feminine fingers to operate a computer.

"We have picked up on a skirmish related to the shootathlon. The Legitimacy Kingdom attacked the Information Alliance. Oddly enough, the Capitalist Corporations interfered."

"This is the Technopics. We expected this much."

A woman with blonde hair and brown skin named Ramil Scofflaw peered at the screen from behind Iris.

Iris quickly moved her fingers and a few more windows opened .

"But three forces exchanging blows at once is a major development. We cannot have more trouble than necessary at this stage. We have yet to bring about the Blank."

"Will this affect anything?"

"It is unlikely, but the security of the overall competition could be increased. If we could create antagonism between Olympia Dome and the athlete's bodyguards, we could stop both of them though."

"No. Any interference from us could reveal our existence too soon."

"But…"

"The Blank is just a means to an end. It is not our ultimate objective. Do not forget what our real goal is. We will carry the risk when it truly matters." Ramil glanced at the screen. "This was the Capitalist Corporations interfering with a Legitimacy Kingdom attack on the Information Alliance, correct?"

"Yes."

"Dig for further details. Once we have those, we can determine whether we can use this or not."

Chapter 2

Part 1

The Technopic Village was prepared in in the space surrounding the dome-shaped stadium. Calling it a "village" was a vestige of the international competition of an older era. It was not really that different from a standard high-rise resort hotel.

Mariydi's bodyguard spoke to her.

"I'm surprised. I didn't take you for the type to get glued to the TV like this."

"I'm interested in the results of the women's 50 meter."

Her interest did not come from newly-found nationalism. She was holding what looked like movie tickets in one hand.

"Did you bet on it?"

"I don't know if it's to pay for the fraud protection, but even a single bet is expensive."

That meant this was not some private gamble. She had officially purchased that gambling ticket from Olympia Dome.

But as she watched the sports news digest, Mariydi pouted her lips in displeasure and threw the tickets down on the table.

"What!? How did they get a faster time than 4.77 seconds on a 50 meter sprint!?"

"Everyone with any sense has been choosing the queen of sprinting ever since the qualifiers."

"Yeah, but you barely win anything for betting on her. That's why I was betting on the top time."

The black athlete who won gold had a time of 4.74 seconds, and other miraculous times in the 4 second range lined up after hers. Of course, humans could not run that quickly under their own power. Those abnormal records were achieved by overcoming the limits of humanity with their sportswear, shoes, and the drugs they were taking.

With no more use for it, Mariydi left the TV and started wandering through the large hotel room.

She seemed more annoyed at having wasted money at all than at the specific amount she had lost.

"Maybe you shouldn't stand near the windows."

"It's polarized glass, so no one can see me from outside," replied Mariydi as she looked out over the night scenery.

Her bodyguard sank into the sofa and shrugged.

"You need to relax more," he said.

"So do you. You look more restless than when we were travelling here from the stadium."

"As your bodyguard, I can't help but feel high-rise buildings like this are dangerous."

"Almost everyone who would try to attack me is allied with another athlete. When we're all gathered in this one spot, they lose the option to blow up the entire building. You could say our safety is guaranteed by everyone taking everyone else hostage."

"If it was really that simple, my pay would not be so high."

"By the way." Mariydi finally turned around. "How long are you planning to stay in here? Alicia and Stacy have already returned to their rooms. Don't tell me you plan to watch me all night long in the name of protecting me."

"I am simply following my contract. Since I have to be in a girl's room, I would personally prefer one with a more glamorous body. " The bodyguard shrugged while still sitting on the couch. "I was hired to stay here until midnight. After that, I will remain on standby outside your room. Simple, right? But simple as it may be, I will be charged for breaking my contract if I do not follow those rules. So just put up with me being here for a little longer."

"…Why do I get the feeling you're going to be waking me up in the morning?"

"Sorry, but I don't have to do anything else until you head out for breakfast. If you need someone to wake you, you should hire a maid."

Mariydi lightly clicked her tongue and looked back at the night scenery outside the window.

"I'm surprised Olympia Dome did not do more to intervene," she said.

"What are you talking about?"

"The attack on Erie Greenhat. Even if the individual athletes and the organizations they belong to have bodyguards, Olympia Dome is supposed to put a stop to incidents like that."

The attack had been carried out by bodyguards who were supposed to be protecting an athlete, but the management at Olympia Dome had to have known what was going on.

While still relaxing on the couch, the bodyguard said, "They have their own issues to deal with. Plus, they don't want to put their own lives in danger by getting more involved than they have to."

"…"

"Most of Olympia Dome's military force is made up of UAVs and UUVs. It's almost all unmanned. Given that, you can guess how little the few actual soldiers would want to go out and fight, right?"

"But they definitely go all out when it comes to equipment," spat out Mariydi as she pointed out into the night scenery.

She was not pointing at the artificial land.

She was pointing into the pitch black ocean spreading out beyond it. Lights from ships larger than aircraft carriers could be seen encroaching into what should have been empty night.

"Look at those giant transformer ships. I think they're called Ocean Substations. The actual power generation is carried out by satellites in orbit and then sent to the ships via microwaves. The power is then converted into a laser and sent to the dome where it provides energy for the various types of unmanned weapons."

"Power generating satellites, hm?"

"They generate solar power from outside the earth's atmosphere. For a while, they were being hailed as the saviors of the earth from global warming, but the use of the technology waned because the large surface area increases the risk of striking orbital debris. And since the solar panels that were struck by debris just became more debris cluttering things up in orbit, there has even been some talk of restricting their use under international law. It really is a roundabout way of going all out."

The transformation facilities themselves required power to function.

The Ocean Substations secured that power by mining methane hydrate and using it as fuel for gas turbines.

The reason that was not enough for the primary power generation was because the amount of power required was ridiculously huge.

"They have their reasons," said the man. "They generate the power off the island and send it to Olympia Dome via laser. Then the island's normal power network brings power to the dome where smaller lasers send power out to recharge the various types of unmanned weapons." As the bodyguard spoke as if reading from a textbook, he shook his head. "Do you see why the management goes to such lengths to keep the power generation outside the dome itself? They could easily generate the power here , but they don't. By generating the power for the unmanned weaponry outside of the dome, they are trying to show that Olympia Dome has very little military value. That way it will not be targeted by Objects."

Also, there was a danger of the microwaves having a negative effect on computers or the unmanned weaponry if they were sent directly to Olympia Dome from the satellites.

Some claimed it also had an effect on the human body, but no scientific basis for those claims had ever been proven. However, Olympia Dome was in the service business. Even groundless fears could prevent people from coming, so they would avoid that whenever possible.

That was why the microwaves were sent down to the sea away from Olympia Dome and then the power was sent via laser.

"So having too much of a military force would be dangerous, but this way they can also take action in an emergency, hm?"

"And the bodyguard business did not have to decline," commented the bodyguard.

"At any rate," said Mariydi as she motionlessly stared at the giant transformer ships in the distance. "It looks like we'll have to overcome any more trouble on our own."

Part 2

The Bifröst Arch was one of Olympia Dome's most famous sightseeing spots. It was a collection of seven parallel arch-shaped metal bridges spanning a giant canal that jutted inland. Its name came from the fact that they were lit up at night each with a different color giving a total of 7 lights.

Bifröst was a rainbow bridge appearing in Norse mythology.

It had been designed primarily to provide that sight at night rather than with practicality in mind, so the bridges were built quite close together. When they were all lit up, people often mistook the seven separate bridges for one large bridge.

It was a well-known spot for people to gather if the international sports competition was not enough for them, but there were a surprising number of people there for so late at night

when almost everyone stayed in a hotel. This was due to some tabloid-style information websites publishing strange data about how it was the perfect spot for a couple to naturally begin an embrace.

A woman was leaning on the handrail of the walking area on the Bifröst Arch.

She was Stacy the pharmacist.

Alicia stood tall next to her.

She looked suspiciously down at the solid bridge beneath her feet.

"It's shaking. Is that because this is an artificial island?"

"It isn't that poorly made." Stacy was more accustomed to Olympia Dome, so she was grinning. "The visitors are just making too much of a commotion. When you have tens of thousands of people running around, a seismometer can pick it up. The last winter games were especially amazing."

"…But all of the events are over by this time of night."

"This is from people getting excited with a beer mug in one hand while watching the recorded and edited digests. I hear they have power generation panels set up under the floors of the club halls."

This level of excitement was for events that they already knew the results for. It had to be even crazier during live broadcasts and in the stadium stands.

However, the Technopics's ability to draw customers was not what Alicia was there to discuss.

She was solely focused on the monetary transactions she was in charge of.

"What do you think?"

"About what?"

Stacy held a cocktail glass in her right hand. She had made the cocktail herself using the ingredients in the cooler at her feet.

The bright lights around them made it impossible to tell what color the cocktail was as Stacy sipped at it.

With no expression on her face, Alicia replied, "About Mariydi Whitewitch."

"She is still within acceptable bounds, isn't she?" After finishing off the contents of the glass, Stacy placed the cocktail glass on the ground and started rummaging through the cooler. "The Technopics are always wrapped in greed and intrigue, so attacks and other forms of interference are not exactly rare. And when such incidents happen, you often get athletes fighting back."

"If it had been an attack against her, I would understand. But she took action to help an Information Alliance athlete."

"I doubt you could ever get her to admit that. But it was an incident that will probably make her autograph more valuable."

"The type that empathizes with others is dangerous. If she goes easy on an opponent after hearing their situation, her actions could negatively affect all of us supporting her."

"Maybe." Stacy smiled as she shook the shaker she held in both hands. "But she seems like the type that views competitions as cut off from all that. She would be the type that does not allow those things to affect her decision when she has to kill them in battle."

"I certainly hope you are right."

"Well, she is the military type," said Stacy lightly as she poured the liquid from the shaker and into the glass. As she dropped in a skewered pearl onion for decoration, she spoke as if the topic at hand had nothing to do with her. "Also, she is the strange kind of person that continues to excel as an ace pilot even in this age of Objects. Mariydi Whitewitch is the Capitalist Corporations' Ice Girl 1. And it isn't just her. There is also the Legitimacy Kingdom's Burning Alpha and the Faith Organization's Rocket Icarus. For the most part, all of those aces who continue in this age hold the same ideal in their hearts: the desire to fly even if it means they must go against the common thinking of the age. It is only natural for her to run counter to the normal thinking here as well."

"…"

"Surely you looked into this new partner ahead of time. You have seen Ice Girl 1's records, right?"

Stacy brought the edge of the glass to her lips.

Still standing tall, Alicia said, "She has frequently disobeyed orders in the past. But every time it resulted in her ultimately being praised for her actions."

"It must be that cute side of her that keeps the Sky Blue PMC air force from letting her go. …Normally, a Capitalist Corporations soldier would never think of risking being thrown into the detention barracks by intercepting a cruise missile that was ' accidentally' fired at a safe country city." Stacy smiled as she lightly shook the cocktail glass. "But it is true that no method is perfect for all situations, so surely she is a better option than some thickheaded muscular idiot, right? They say someone who listens to the opinions of others will live longer, but you also need to know how to manage that information."

"I tried speaking with her to figure out how she thinks."

"…You can be that sociable?"

"It looks like this will be difficult as I cannot figure out what she wants. She does not seem interested in fame and she has shown no real fixation on the rewards from her sponsors. If I do not know what her goal is, I will have difficulty controlling her in that way."

"It's simple," said Stacy as she brought the edge of the cocktail glass back to her lips. "At that age, kids can get a bit obsessed with justice."

"?"

"She came all the way from the long, drawn-out war in the Northern European Restricted Zone to take part in this farce of a festival. From that, it seems obvious there is something here she wants that she could not get there. And since she risked her life to save an athlete from another world power, she does not seem interested simply in the results of the event or in a medal."

'Then what is it?"

"Productivity." Stacy grabbed the plastic skewer between two fingers and bit the pearl onion off. "If she wants something she cannot obtain by fighting and killing, don't you think that might be it? A record, a high placement, or a medal could be seen as a form of productivity. But unfortunately, it seems she is not willing to kill to gain those things."

"…"

"See? Doesn't it make you wish you were still that young and idealistic? She left the battlefield to gain something she could not get there but she charged right back into battle as soon as she saw someone being attacked before her eyes. That's the cute ego of someone still in the process of growing up." After she finished eating the pearl onion, she gulped down the contents of the glass at a rapid pace "Just like you, I will work with any athlete as long

as I get paid. That's just how things work in the Capitalist Corporations. But it is true that I feel more motivated when it's someone fun to work with. And I think I can give my all for this athlete." Stacy held the empty cocktail glass out towards Alicia like it was a microphone and asked, "How about you?"

"No matter who I am working with, a job is a job. What matters is how much I am getting paid to do it."

"Hmm." Stacy pulled the glass back, looking unsatisfied with that answer. "But I never would have guessed someone as straight-laced as you would have a cocktail set like this."

"I make sure to have a full array of drinks prepared when I am entertaining. I lost the chance for tonight and some of the ingredients will soon lose their flavor."

"You definitely open a lot of different bottles when making a cocktail, but you use so little of every individual thing. You never seem to run out of anything." Stacy looked down at the cooler at her feet. "Can I borrow that? I think I'll drink some more in my room."

"As long as you pay for the amount you drink."

"…But you just said you didn't know what to do with it since it was beginning to lose its flavor."

Alicia and Stacy's gazes clashed as intense negotiations began.

Part 3

The next morning, Mariydi was wakened by a hard rock song she had downloaded being played at high volume. She silenced the alarm clock with a fist and sat up in bed with sleepy eyes. Her beloved alarm clock was covered in scratches and dents, but she knew it could be worse. She had gone only that far because it was playing a famous song. If it had simply been the standard electronic tone, she would have thrown the clock against the wall.

Mariydi yawned on top of the bed.

She figured she had escaped having her bodyguard shake her awake because she had locked the door's chain lock and then pushed a chair and magazine rack in front of the door.

With the bottom of the hotel's one-size-fits-all bathrobe dragging behind her, Mariydi walked around the room and drank some cooled carbonated water from the refrigerator. Once her mind cleared a bit, she headed into the bathroom. She took a lukewarm shower and lightly washed her entire body with menthol body soap to fully wake herself up. But she regretted it immediately afterwards. As she started to shiver at the strange chill she felt on her skin, she started her battle with the dryer while nude.

"Hot!? Dammit. How do you change the temperature…?"

She fiddled with the dryer, but could not find a switch that did what she wanted. She eventually gave up on the dryer and settled on lightly wiping down her hair with the bath towel. She then put on her usual yellow and black flight jacket and removed the chair and magazine rack blocking the door.

Mariydi opened the door and her bodyguard spoke to her with an expression that made it look like he could barely stand it.

"How could you do that?"

"If you want to enter my field of vision in the morning, start by shaving that half-assed beard." Mariydi yawned while scratching at her half-dried hair. "So what are we having for breakfast?"

"The same as dinner yesterday. Now that the event has begun, the safety standards are set much higher. That pharmacist, Miss Stacy Palmetto, said she would do her best to make sure the food doesn't interfere with your performance any. For a fee of course."

"…I get the feeling any food she makes won't exactly be normal ."

Meanwhile, Alicia Sloppyjoes walked towards them from the elevator hall. Her pace was as exact as the second hand of a clock and she was standing as straight as ever.

"Good morning." She gave a bow so exact it looked like it had been measured out with a protractor. "May I confirm today's schedule with you?"

"The second day of the shootathlon doesn't begin until 4 PM, right? I thought I was free until then."

"The second day is a combination of long-distance swimming and sharpshooting. To fine-tune everything for aquatic use, we need to test your sportswear, rifle, and methods of doping. Once noon arrives, think of all those things as locked in place."

"So I'll be swimming through some giant bathtub, hm?"

"The event itself takes place in the dome, but we cannot use that facility beforehand. The final test will be carried out in the swimming area outside the dome. In other words, in the ocean."

"Understood."

"Also, an offer to cover you has arrived from a television station ."

"What a pain." A displeased expression immediately appeared on Mariydi's face "So what does our sponsor think? Do they want to use it as advertisement for their new rifle?"

"The sponsor has given the okay."

"In other words, I'm pretty much being forced to take part."

"They assume this will give their new rifle more exposure. Whenever you are in frame, make sure you are holding the rifle. The company name is displayed on your flight jacket, but if possible, try to casually mention the company name or product name once every five…no, three minutes."

Mariydi glanced over at her bodyguard. He simply shrugged. He was likely annoyed at the extra work this gave him as a bodyguard.

But it was the sponsor that was paying all of them.

And both Mariydi and the bodyguard were mercenaries.

"So what station is it?"

"Catwalk TV."

"…Isn't that an Information Alliance Net TV station?"

"It seems you caught their interest and admiration when you saved Erie Greenhat yesterday."

"Do they really want to cover a representative of the Capitalist Corporations? And a soldier at that."

"It is a report on the peaceful festival that overcomes the boundaries between the world powers, so that should not be an issue. What matters most is that we have permission from the sponsor."

"Your top priority is advertisement for the new rifle, right? What good does it do to advertise a Capitalist Corporations product in the Information Alliance?"

"It is all about what is being talked about. Also, Information Alliance programs are distributed over the internet, so it is open for anyone to view."

"Understood. I'll leave the delicate power balance issues to you."

"Then that is all I need to discuss for now."

At that point, Stacy arrived pushing a room service cart.

She made a big show of displaying the food she had made.

"Tah dah! This will give you health and strength!! Even without using doping, you can do a lot with different types of healthy foods with things like vegetable and fish extracts added. Each of these dishes will have you running around like a wild beast. Which one do you want?"

"…I just want some normal food."

"For your honesty, you get this gold axe!!"

When it seriously looked like Stacy was going to force her to eat some of that food, Mariydi frantically hid behind her bodyguard.

Part 4

"Yes, yes. Yes, hello. I am Lucas Westernrose of Catwalk TV. Yes, welcome, yes."

Mariydi was not speaking with him over the phone, so that simply must have been how that young man always talked. The digital business card he sent to her handheld device said he was a director, but Mariydi did not know much about the television business, so she had no idea what level that position was at.

(He looks to be around 20. His business card lists gives him a long list of titles, so do Information Alliance internet businesses have no system of seniority?)

Mariydi was an ace pilot at the age of 12, so she may not have been the best person to make the complaint, but the man standing before her seemed rather suspicious to her. To be blunt, she was unsure if he could actually carry out the job of a standard office worker.

Mariydi was sitting at the same table as Lucas in the second floor lounge of the resort hotel known as the Technopic Village. However, they were not carrying out a live broadcast. They were merely having a preliminary meeting.

"So what do you want to film me doing?"

"Yes, about that. Yes, frankly speaking, I had a contract with Erie Greenhat up until yesterday. I was making a documentary about the sweat and tears she put into this, yes."

"…And?"

"Yes, your actions saved her life, but, yes, she would have a real difficulty participating in the 2nd and 3rd days of the shootathlon

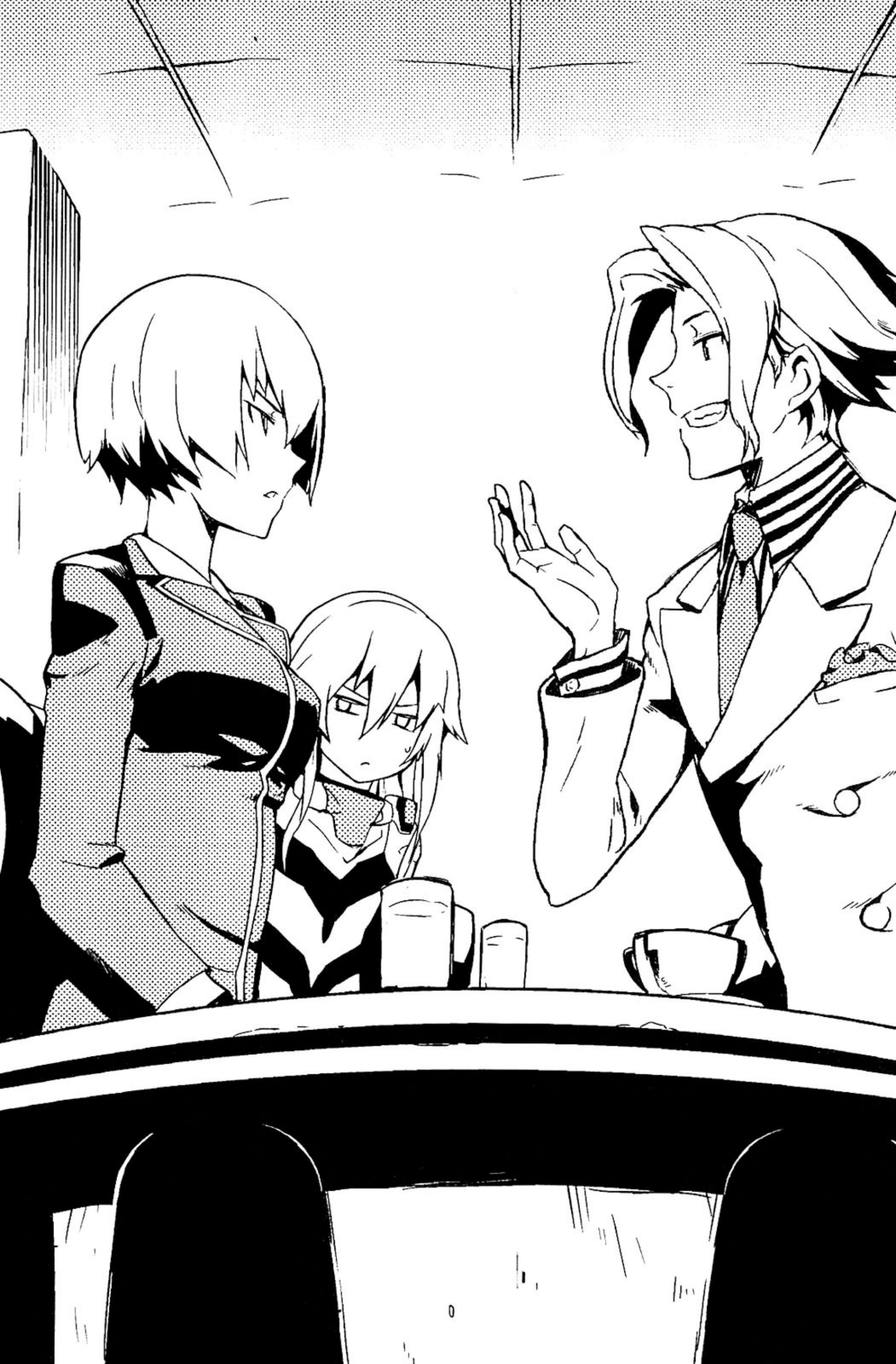
with her injuries, right? Yes, well, even with Greenhat out of the running, I can still follow the story of her recovery. But that will be more of a long term story, yes, yes. TV stations have sponsors too, yes, yes, and I cannot betray their expectations. I need to get the ratings they want in the short term of the festival."

Alicia was sitting in the seat next to Mariydi and nodding vigorously, but Mariydi herself did not understand what Lucas meant.

What did Erie have to do with her?

"Well, to get down to the point, I want a replacement for Greenhat, yes. Yes, for the documentary. But all of the other Information Alliance athletes have contracts with other stations, so it would be difficult to work my way in, yes. …That means, yes, my path to success must head into uncharted waters, yes."

"…"



"Yes, yes, that's right. And I want to use as much of the footage of Greenhat I already have as possible. That means, yes, if I follow the person who saved her, that footage can fit nicely in, yes."

"…So what do we do?" Mariydi asked Alicia.

Alicia straightened her back and said, "Our primary goal is to appeal to the performance of the sponsor's new rifle. I agreed to this meeting in the hopes that this could make a good advertisement, but if you follow her before, during, and after the events, I am worried it would hinder her ability to maintain her prime condition. If that would happen, I must decli-…"

"Yes, yes, Catwalk TV has a broadcast contract with a major Capitalist Corporations station, so I would think this would act as an excellent advertisement in your territory. Yes, yes. And this is an international sports event rather than a war, so we are under no pressure from the military, yes. That gives us much more freedom in our editing. In addition to covering the athlete, yes, yes, we can give at least 3 full minutes of commentary on the use of the rifle itself."

"That settles it. We should accept his offer."

"You certainly are easy to understand, you dog of society," said Mariydi in annoyance. "You can broadcast the events live, but do not broadcast any other footage without letting me see it first. Is that okay?"

"Yes, yes, of course, yes."

Alicia then cut in, "Also, I will give you a script and some official diagrams to use when commenting on the rifle."

"Yes, yes."

"I am from the Capitalist Corporations. I do not know what people in the Information Alliance would find offensive. Do not forget that I might unwittingly touch on something like that."

"Yes, of course, yes, yes. We will be careful too, yes, yes. But it should be fine, yes," said Lucas with a huge grin on his face. "Yes, your rescue of Greenhat yesterday has already made it to all the Information Alliance news sites, yes, and even if people may not be fond of the Capitalist Corporations as a whole, yes, yes, I think they feel rather fondly, yes, about you personally Mariydi Whitewitch, yes."

"Fine then."

"I will send the ID information on the camera crew, yes, to your bodyguard. Yes, no one but those crewmembers will approach you . Yes, yes, if anyone else approaches claiming to be from Catwalk TV, yes, treat them as if they are an enemy, yes."

"Oh, and don't even think about following me into the bathroom."

"…Um, this may sound rude, but, yes, from a style standpoint, yes, yes, you do not really provide any of the user needs, yes. And we are trying to run a business here…"

"Where the hell do you think you're looking while making that comment?"

Part 5

The Technopics were being held in Olympia Dome, a giant manmade island floating close to the center of the Atlantic Ocean. People wanted to enjoy swimming in the ocean, but it did not grow gradually deeper like with natural land. Not only was it too deep to stand, but the ocean stretched down into the depths enjoyed by deep sea fish.

That made it sound like suicide to swim there, but the management of the island paid attention to what the visitors wanted.

"Basically, they have created artificial land gradually sloping down for the swimming area. The ocean surface hides it, but the artificial island continues for a ways past the coastline. Right?"

"Yes, but if you get caught in a sudden current, you can get swept out to sea. Don't think of it as a normal beach."

After listening to her bodyguard's warnings, Mariydi dove into the 2 meters deep ocean water. However, she had not changed into a swimsuit. She was still wearing her usual flight jacket. She normally wore it to withstand the Gs of piloting a fighter, but it was based on the special suits worn by Object Elites. It worked so perfectly as sportswear for the shootathlon because it was made to withstand every sort of environment.

As Mariydi easily treaded water with her heavy rifle on a sling belt, her bodyguard frowned.

"You would look a lot cuter with an inner tube."

"Sorry, but I'm not an Information Alliance idol Elite. I don't need cuteness for my business."

Alicia then cut in while operating her handheld device

"The sponsor's new rifle is semi-auto. It is primarily waterproof , but the next round is automatically loaded using the combustion gas from the previous round. If water gets in the passageway, it might jam."

"If it comes to it, I can load the bullets one at a time through the empty cartridge ejection point."

"What about doping?" asked Stacy the pharmacist with a popsicle in one hand. "Since you will be swimming, it would probably be better to increase the amount of oxygen you carry. And I bet something to work against muscle pain would have some effect at relieving your fatigue from yesterday."

"…I tried the time-delayed transfusion yesterday, but the raised blood pressure threw me off towards the end. I think it would help my results if I don't try to give myself any unneeded help."

"So you're just going to deny my entire reason for being here, are you, you damn brat?"

Then, a yellow toy submarine floated toward Mariydi.

No. It was being piloted toward her via remote control. It was an underwater camera for Catwalk TV.

"…Are you going to be following me around 24/7 with this kind of thing?"

"Swim the breaststroke. Filming you from behind will make some good fanservice," commented the bodyguard.

"I've already been told I'm not even in the running as far as that is concerned," replied Mariydi before beginning to swim away from the coast.

The seawater stung her eyes as she was not wearing goggles, but it was not enough to keep her from opening her eyes. Since this was in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean and away from any industrial areas, the water was incredibly transparent for an area surrounded by manmade structures.

Olympia Dome's swimming area had an artificial bottom, so it had no beach. It was all smoothly constructed. The area Mariydi was currently swimming in was about 2 meters deep, but it grew deeper at stepped intervals the further out one went.

And…

(Are those rectangular blocks sticking up from the bottom meant to keep suspicious ships from landing here? No, maybe they're meant to control the current.)

These rectangular pillars were 80 cm square and about a meter tall. They were placed at the bottom at even intervals. They moved up and down irregularly to control the flow of the seawater in real time.

The bodyguard had said she could be swept out to sea by a sudden current. These were likely meant to prevent that.

(But that over there isn't meant to regulate the current. Is it a moveable breakwater?)

The depth of the swimming area changed at stepped intervals, and a large notch ran along the line of each change. Mariydi guessed a breakwater made of reinforced polyurethane could be raised from below.

And as she had that thought, Mariydi heard Alicia's voice from her piezoelectric receiver.

"You are about to reach the area for target practice."

(Is she following my location using GPS?)

While thinking of the show it was providing for the VIPs or sex offenders, Mariydi stopped moving her legs for forward momentum and started treading water in place. The yellow submarine-shaped underwater camera circled around her, but she had no idea what would be best for the footage.

(Well, while underwater, I can't respond even if I can hear them .)

She brought her head above water and looked around.

A metal rail stretched between two rubber boats, and a human-shaped target was sliding on top of it. It was about 300 meters away. That was relatively close range for sniping, but she could not brace herself while treading water and the waves were causing the boats to rock irregularly. It would not be a simple shot.

Mariydi used both hands to grab the rifle hanging from a sling belt.

"Practicing is all fine and good, but that monster basking in the sun out at sea isn't going to make any mistake about this, is it?"

"You mean the Object acting as a guard? The one you can see from here is the Information Alliance's Second Generation Henrietta…or Gatling 033 as they call it."

"I'd rather not be shot by that ridiculously huge Gatling gun due to a misunderstanding."

"We officially requested practice time, so they know what we are doing. And an anti-personnel sniper rifle is not enough to even scratch an Object. I do not think there is any room for a misunderstanding."

(I'm more worried about them trying to crush a skilled athlete under the guise of a misunderstanding.)

But when she thought about it rationally, she had an Information Alliance TV camera watching her at all times. Even if

the Information Alliance wanted to interfere, they would not let their own people see it.

"Okay, I'm about to begin."

"We do not have permission to use live rounds here, so you will be firing blanks with a low-output laser. The target is covered with sensors to detect the laser, so it can detect whether you hit or not. The blanks allow you to feel the proper recoil and get a feel for shooting in the water."

"It's against the rules to put air in your sportswear, but how about I make you a protector made of a highly buoyant material?" suggested Stacy.

"That might make the swimming easier," replied Mariydi, "but it would just throw off my balance when treading water and affect my aim. And that isn't the job of a pharmacist."

"Too bad. …Oh, right. If you maintain a good enough position today that a medal is still in reach, will you give me your autograph?"

"That isn't the job of a pharmacist either."

Mariydi remained still with her upper body sticking out of the ocean as she held up the sniper rifle in her small hands. She peered through the scope and pulled the trigger without hesitation.

She heard the explosive sound of the discharge and the recoil shake her shoulder. And then an electronic tone sounded from her piezoelectric receiver.

"Bull's eye, hm? …It just doesn't feel real with a toy."

"Theoretically, everything should seem almost exactly the same as the real deal."

"I can't measure the effect of the wind with this. By the way, are none of the other athletes out practicing? I was sure the place was going to be as packed as the beach during swimming season," said Mariydi.

Her bodyguard replied, "They thought this through. If more than one athlete is out here at a time, it raises the risk of attempted interference or fights. They give everyone their own short time to practice. Some had their chance as far back as around 2 weeks ago. "

"…Why did I end up not getting a chance until the very last second?"

"Miss Alicia messed up when the lots were drawn."

Mariydi clicked her tongue and the bodyguard laughed before continuing.

"Well, wearing yourself out before the event isn't good, but it's still better than being attacked mid-practice, right?"

"…I think this camera hanging around me is hoping some ' entertainment' like that happens."

"While we're on the topic of what the viewers would want to see, why don't you drink some milk and grow a sexier body? I'm sure they would love that."

"If you like, I could give you some hormone drugs," added Stacy.

"That is not how it works," said Alicia. "The viewers would prefer to see the vain efforts of a flat-chested girl. It is a type of joke at her own expense."

"I hope you all go blind," said Mariydi before expressionlessly firing her laser gun toward the coast.

The bodyguard ignored her and said, "Your time is almost up. Once you have gained a feel for the rifle, come on back. Even if you don't want any doping, you should at least see a masseuse. You need to relieve as much of your fatigue as possible before the event."

"…I think I know two old hags that need a massage more than I do."

Alicia and Stacy each grabbed a spare rifle and fired lasers toward her, but Mariydi ignored them, ducked her head underwater, and began swimming back toward the coast.

But then…

The yellow underwater camera running directly alongside her suddenly stopped moving. At first, Mariydi thought its battery had gone dead, but that did not seem to be the case. The propeller that provided thrust and the rudder used to steer were twitching like a dying fish.

At the same time, the voices from Alicia and the others stopped coming from the piezoelectric receiver.

The only explanation Mariydi could think of was…

(Electronic interference…Jamming!?)

Only a few seconds later, a bullet from an underwater firearm ripped through the sea water in her direction.

Part 6

An underwater firearm.

As the name suggested, it was a gun developed to be fired underwater. The concept would have been impossible in the days of the matchlock and flintlock guns that had the powder exposed when firing, but it was not that difficult in an age where the cartridges were airtight. Simply put, water getting in the gun was not enough to get the powder wet, so the gun could still be fired.

What still made underwater firearms difficult to pull off was the combustion gas from the powder. In semi-auto and full-auto guns,

that gas was used to move the internal parts and automatically load the next round. If the passageway for that gas was blocked with water, the gun could jam.

The means of solving that problem were exceedingly simple.

That convenient function was eliminated from the gun. The combustion gas issue was completely eliminated by manually loading each round and ejecting each empty cartridge using the bolt action method.

Naturally, the lack of automatic loading meant it could not be fired continuously.

But the target's speed dropped considerably while underwater. In that environment, a single well-aimed shot at a time was enough of a threat even without rapid-fire.

Mariydi was unarmed, so she had no way to counterattack.

But she could not escape the bullet ripping through the ocean water just by swimming.

(Dammit!!)

She avoided death by turning herself completely around and heading for the bottom rather than the surface. She was trying to hide behind one of the rectangular pillars standing at even intervals that controlled the current.

The primary reason she had not been killed by the first shot was that they were underwater. Water resistance and the current could

cause slight errors in the trajectory of the bullet, so her enemy's aim could not be perfect. Modern rifles were equipped with several types of assisting sensors, but the infrared and such for those sensors were affected by the seawater too.

And so the bullet flew by, just barely missing Mariydi, and she managed to hide behind one of the pillars.

But she could not rely on her enemy making mistakes forever.

If the enemy corrected the sensors based on that "mistake", the next shot would have perfect accuracy.

Mariydi poked her face out from behind the pillar and then immediately pulled it back.

(Are they targeting me as a high-ranking athlete? No, that underwater rifle is a Legitimacy Kingdom model. Is this revenge for my interference in their attack on Erie Greenhat!?)

Mariydi balled herself up to use the pillar as a shield, but several bullets were ripping through the seawater on the left and right. No one could fire that many bullets that fast with a simple bolt action firearm. She was likely being fired at by several assassins armed with underwater firearms.

(Not good.)

She did not have an oxygen tank. Her breath was not going to last long. But since the pillar was only about a meter tall, she would be exposing her entire body if she tried to reach the surface.

And her enemies were probably not stupid enough to let her escape that unharmed.

If her assassins were the type to not rush their victory and to simply wait for her to drown, there would be nothing she could do .

But…

Luck was on Mariydi's side. One of the assassins got fed up with the rectangular pillar blocking his bullets, so he moved forward to circle around the pillar.

They must have known that Mariydi only had a practice rifle. Otherwise he never would have taken such a bold action.

But he was too naïve.

(There's still plenty more I can do, you idiot!!)

Mariydi jumped out toward the assassin in a black diving suit as he tried to circle around the pillar. She grabbed the bolt action underwater rifle in one hand and used the other hand to pull a knife with a blade of about 20 cm out of the sheath on the assassin' s shoulder.

By the time she could see the assassin's eyes open wide through the goggles of his diving suit, Mariydi was already stabbing the stolen knife toward his face with all her strength.

Due to the water resistance, it was more effective to stab the knife straight on than to swing it horizontally.

"!?"

The assassin immediately swung his head to the side and avoided the blade, but it sliced through the rubber tube connecting to the tank on his back instead. While practically embracing the assassin, Mariydi brought the sliced tube into her mouth. She sucked in the much-needed oxygen.

And in exchange, the assassin was now having trouble breathing as seawater flowed into his mask through the tube.

He frantically tried to tear Mariydi off of him using his underwater rifle, but…

(I have the barrel under my arm. There's no way you can hit me .)

And more importantly…

(You should think a little harder about what it means to be this close to someone armed with a knife.)

A slight sound could be heard.

It was the sound of the knife stabbing into the assassin's chest.

Instead of a fountain of blood, what looked like a red mist spread out within the water.

Now that all strength had left the assassin's grip, Mariydi took the underwater rifle from him, but then another assassin made his move.

He fired at her with his own underwater rifle from a distance of 20 meters.

"!!"

Mariydi used the dead assassin as a shield. She had not intended to do so. She had moved on instinct alone, but he functioned as a decent shield.

(Are they using hollow-point bullets despite using rifles because they know the water resistance will lower the piercing power? Those bullets do more damage by staying in the body, so it won't pierce straight through a dead body.)

But if it had hit the body's oxygen tank, it would have caused an explosion. With that in mind, luck still played a large role in her survival.

After thinking through that far…

(I can use that weakness, too.)

Mariydi pulled back the cocking lever of the underwater rifle, loaded a bullet into the mechanical portion, and aimed while still embracing the dead body. The spreading red of blood obstructed her vision, but the tube torn from the tank was her only source of oxygen so she had to put up with it.

She fired without hesitation.

The bullet struck the oxygen tank on one of the assassin's backs.

A dull explosive noise spread through the water. The man wearing it and two or three others near him were torn apart.

But that did not come close to defeating the enemy.

Plenty of assassins remained.

The ocean water may have been clear, but she could not see beyond a kilometer away. Five or six more assassins wearing diving suits appeared as they swam in from beyond that distance. They were all armed with underwater rifles.

(Shit!! What are my bodyguards doing!?)

While still holding the dead body, Mariydi hid behind the rectangular pillar once more. The body was in the way, so she fumbled with the hole-filled diving suit and managed to undo the latch holding the tank on. She tossed away the body and sucked in air from the sliced tube.

(That man had better not tell me he was just watching the glittering surface of the ocean and didn't know what was going on underwater!!)

Despite the advantages she had gained, Mariydi was still at the disadvantage.

She was hiding behind that pillar, but she would simply fall victim to the assassins' underwater rifles if they surrounded the pillar from all directions while maintaining a decent distance. She would likely kill a few of them in the process, but Mariydi had no chance if they were willing to take some losses.

(Should I fire at the surface to try to get my bodyguards to notice? No, these bolt action underwater rifles don't even have 10 rounds in them. If those idiots didn't notice the pillar of water, I would just be shortening my own life.)

She decided to focus on getting safely away rather than on killing all of the enemies.

Just as she began to think of a way to do that…

With a deafening roar, a large number of autocannon shells rained down from above the ocean surface and tore the approaching Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers to pieces.

(What!?)

The situation was hard to grasp with the rapidly expanding red murkiness. Mariydi desperately tried to gather information while hiding behind the rectangular block. She sensed the sunlight from above being blocked out for just an instant.

She looked up.

A motorboat about 20 meters long was cutting by above.

And it was not just that one.

She could see at least three of them.

She could not determine the details from her position, but the motorboats were moving across the ocean surface while almost looking like a bike doing a wheelie. Just like with hydrofoils, a boat could move fastest when it had the least surface area sinking into the water. Without the resistance of the water, a boat could easily reach speeds of 80-150 kph.

While the motorboats moved by overhead once more, shells bigger than a thumb were continually fired into the water from the sides of the boats.

(That isn't Legitimacy Kingdom equipment. Are these Olympia Dome's UUVs!?)

If so, this was a one in a million chance.

If Mariydi simply continued to hide behind the rectangular pillar, the Legitimacy Kingdom assassins would surround her. Her best bet was to climb aboard one of the motorboats. Since there were multiple motorboats, the others could provide cover fire while the one she was aboard headed for shore.

"…"

Mariydi poked her head slightly out from the pillar.

The Legitimacy Kingdom assassins were under attack from the UUV motorboats, but they had not been wiped out. Heading to the surface would still be risky.

(But if I don't make it to the surface, the motorboats can't pick me up. If they manage to regroup, I'll have lost my chance. I need to take action now while they're confused!!)

Mariydi made up her mind and headed straight up from behind the rectangular box. She stretched her body out, held the oxygen tank in both hands, and used just the movements of her legs to head for the surface. It was a distance of only a few meters, but Mariydi felt as if her heart was being squeezed the entire time.

But she managed to avoid getting shot by the underwater rifles.

Mariydi finally managed to bring her head above the surface.

"Pwah!! Dammit… All of my bodyguards are getting a pay cut!!"

Cursing, Mariydi waved one hand toward the motorboats. They were unmanned, but the signal would reach the people operating them via camera.

One of the three motorboats turned around in front of Mariydi.

But…

"!? You idiots!!" shouted Mariydi as she ducked her head back underwater.

In the next instant, an explosive noise blasted from the autocannon equipped on the motorboat's deck. Several pillars of water flew up from the ocean surface and the shells ripped

through the same water as Mariydi with trails of bubbles following them.

Mariydi put the tube of the oxygen tank back in her mouth.

(Kh. So I'm a target for attack too!? Did they see that an Information Alliance TV station is here, so Olympia Dome wants to show off their security abilities? If you end up killing the athlete the station is covering, that's completely pointless!!)

Whether it was a good thing or not for the management of the island, Catwalk TV's yellow underwater camera was unusable thanks to the jamming.

The UUVs were controlled remotely as well, but they seemed fine. They must have used a different method for transmitting and receiving their signals. It was possible they had equipment for multiple methods installed to deal with just such a situation.

But that was no relief to Mariydi since the motorboats were indiscriminately firing everywhere.

(I can't hope for cover fire or anything else from them. They've just increased the risk!!)

New trails of bubbles shot down from the surface.

There were 5 to 10 of them.

These were different from the thumb-sized autocannon shells from before. They were metal tubes as big as fire extinguishers. Mariydi recognized them, so she let go of the oxygen tank and covered her ears with both hands.

An explosion occurred immediately afterwards.

They had likely been targeting the Legitimacy Kingdom assassins, but a heavy shock reached Mariydi's gut all the same.

That pain helped Mariydi make up her mind.

(I'm gonna blow them all up.)

Mariydi first swam down to the bottom to retrieve the oxygen tank, and then she looked around the area.

She still had the underwater rifle she had stolen from an assassin, but she would have a difficult time sinking those motorboats with it. They were probably reinforced with composite armor panels. The assassins seemed to be giving a sporadic counterattack of their own, but each time they only gave away their position and were forced to undergo another barrage from the autocannons.

(I need a bigger explosion…Oh, right. I have this.)

Mariydi looked down at the oxygen tank that was keeping her alive.

Not long before, she had blown one of those tanks up to take out some of the assassins. It was possible for her to use it.

(But I'd rather not lose this.)

With her mind made up, Mariydi headed away from the rectangular pillar she was hiding behind and moved along the bottom. She retrieved a no-longer-needed oxygen tank from one of the corpses that was leaking a red murkiness.

(It's strange how a mass of oxygen like this doesn't float.)

She removed the upper half of the two piece wet suit, tied the neck and arms closed to create a "large bag", and stuck the oxygen tank's tube inside.

The "large bag" filled with air and gained new buoyancy.

Once she confirmed the balloon and tank were moving to the surface, Mariydi moved out of the way. Once she made sure one of the motorboats moving freely around the surface had drawn near the tank, she fired her underwater rifle straight through the center of the tank.

She heard a muffled explosion.

The boat was knocked a bit into the air, but…

(No good! It didn't even crack the bottom of the boat. I can't apply the needed damage without a specialized explosive!!)

Mariydi gritted her teeth. Meanwhile, the motorboats fired plenty of autocannon shells in the wrong direction.

Neither the underwater rifle nor the oxygen tank was enough to sink the motorboats.

But Mariydi would not survive if they were not destroyed.

She thought for a bit and then began swimming along the bottom once more. She was once more headed for the oxygen tank of one of the dead Legitimacy Kingdom assassins.

She gathered three or four of the tanks, thought a bit about the fact that so many people had been one-sidedly crushed (it was beyond the point where "torn apart" or "shot full of holes" covered it), and began to take action toward saving her own life.

She was not using them as a mine this time. And so she did not create balloon-like objects to float them to the surface. She left the tanks lying on the smooth manmade bottom. Once she was done with the preparations, Mariydi kicked her legs to swim far enough away.

Once she made it 50 meters away, Mariydi looked straight up while aiming the underwater rifle and holding the oxygen tube in her mouth.

The unmanned motorboats were still moving about above. They were still shooting those ridiculously huge autocannon shells at the Legitimacy Kingdom assassins even as those assassins began showing signs of retreating.

Mariydi did not yell out for them to stop.

She had taken the assassin's lives herself in order to survive. And she had just taken oxygen tanks from their mutilated corpses.

It was the difference between civilian and soldier.

The line between enemy and ally.

Mariydi had those ideas set in her mind and it allowed her to not view all human life as equal. She truly was a different sort of person than the athletes who emphasized sportsmanship.

She sat down on the artificial bottom, held up the bolt action underwater rifle in both hands, and pulled back the cocking lever to load the next round.

She waited for the correct timing.

One of the motorboats made a wide turn and headed in Mariydi 's direction. She knew it was targeting her with its autocannon. It was too late to try to wave her arms to tell it where she was and what her affiliations were. The motorboat was simply trying to eliminate all life in the area.

And so Mariydi Whitewitch gave no sign.

Not even a warning.

When the motorboat arrived within the target area, she did not hesitate to fire the underwater rifle.

She was targeting the oxygen tanks sitting at the artificial bottom of the ocean.

The single bullet looked like it was sucked into one of the tanks, and the tank energetically exploded when its thick metal exterior was breached. That single explosion reached the other tanks around it and the explosion swelled up even larger.

But the explosion occurred at the bottom.

The motorboat was at the surface and had most of its body out of the water entirely, so the blast and shockwave did not reach it.

But Mariydi had not intended for it to.

She had been aiming for the movable breakwater inside the artificial ocean bottom.

With its latch broken, the thick reinforced polyurethane wall shot straight up under its own buoyancy. It looked like a piece of bread shooting up from a toaster.

The UUV was unable to deal with the 3 meter thick and 10 meter tall wall that suddenly appeared on the surface. It frantically tried to turn away, but its right side slammed into the breakwater and the entire motorboat was smashed to pieces.

The other motorboats had been working with the first one in their attack, so they all met similar fates.

Mariydi looked over at one of the motorboats that had sunk to the bottom. She made a vulgar gesture with her middle finger towards its camera lens.

The Legitimacy Kingdom assassins were on the other side of the thick breakwater, so she had no idea if they had escaped or been annihilated. She observed the area for a bit longer, but saw no new movements. It seemed the threat was gone.

Mariydi cautiously headed for the surface.

When she finally managed to breach the surface and suck in some air, she realized the jamming was gone.

She first heard the voice of her bodyguard.

"Our transmissions cut out and Olympia Dome's UUVs were zooming around everywhere. What happened? Did you do something?"

"…You complacent idiot. Well, whatever. I'll let you people deal with the complaints from the management."

Enemy Forces 2

In a rental storehouse for civilian helicopters at one end of Olympia Dome, Ramil Scofflaw watched a television unnaturally sitting in front of her. She had nothing else to do because she was waiting for her subordinates to finish their work.

It was obvious from how her brown fingertips fidgeted with her blonde hair that she was displeased.

She was of course watching a Technopics broadcast, but the advertisements for sponsor companies were colored more garishly than the events themselves and the odds for gambling were displayed next to the results of the events. The layout disgusted her whenever she saw it. An athlete could only play their proper role in the framework of a sport, but it was vividly clear that these people were built into something more sinister than that.

(This blasphemy is like getting people to buy clothes by selling the people wearing the clothes.)

At that point, Ramil's subordinate, Iris Aggravation, called out to her.

"We have the information now. The Capitalist Corporations did indeed save an Information Alliance athlete on the first day of the shootathlon. Afterwards, the Legitimacy Kingdom changed their target to the Capitalist Corporations. They were probably acting out of revenge."

"And?" asked Ramil.

"Before the second day began, the Legitimacy Kingdom attacked the Capitalist Corporations. But Olympia Dome's UUV motorboats intervened, so no serious harm was done. It is unclear if the Legitimacy Kingdom plans to continue their attacks on the Capitalist Corporations."

"Fine then. They will not make a ceasefire announcement over an unofficial attack. And that means there is an official possibility of the attacks continuing. We can use that to bring about the Blank."

The Blank.

Ramil spoke of what was obviously a codename.

They chose to work inside that storehouse that did not even have air conditioning because they were preparing for a military operation.

Ramil exchanged a look with a maintenance soldier wearing a work uniform and the man gave her a thumbs up.

The maintenance soldiers were preparing a Faith Organization recoilless rifle. The weapon fired a shell while held over the shoulder and it could destroy armored vehicles like tanks. However, the warhead inside was a Legitimacy Kingdom model.

Their plan included the reuse of a weapon the Faith Organization had acquired on the battlefield.

The barrel had been altered to match the other world power's caliber, and with a few other adjustments, the Legitimacy Kingdom warhead could be fired without issue.

Their goal was not to hide the colors of the Faith Organization.

They were mixing together the colors of multiple world powers to make it unclear who was truly behind the attack.

"Just to be sure, we are altering the exterior of the armored vehicles and fighters to Legitimacy Kingdom colors."

"The Blank is just a means to an end, not the end itself. We do not need to deploy that many weapons at this time." Ramil glanced at the computer monitor behind Iris and said, "Check the transport route."

"We have narrowed down which Capitalist Corporations athlete has the possibility of being attacked by the Legitimacy Kingdom."

A few lines were added to the map and Ramil's expression softened.

"We can use this."

"Yes."

"Then get ready. To bring about the Blank like this, it would be best to have at least 3 recoilless rifles and over 15 shots. And have three people to support each recoilless rifle. Each of those people needs an assault rifle, a handgun, and everything else needed for a full complement. Mix different colors together for all of them. Make sure to mix in the Faith Organization's colors as well. It may look like we have a lot of time, but it will seem like a lot less once it passes. Finish all this by dawn."

"Understood."

"Once the assault teams are organized, tell them to mix together languages and hand signs from different world powers. I trust that none of them are stupid enough to need translation software to keep up with that."

Once she had given the necessary orders, Ramil pulled a small bottle of wine out of a refrigerator in the storehouse.

She removed the cap, lightly held the bottle out into the empty air and towards no one in particular, and then took a swig of the alcohol.

"Glory to the festival."

Chapter 3

Part 1

It was 8 PM.

The second day of the shootathlon was over and Mariydi was relaxing in the lounge of the resort hotel known as the Technopic Village. (Her coffee and cake had been prepared by her pharmacist named Stacy.) Alicia sat across from her and asked a question with a blank expression.

"Was it really necessary to go that far?"

"Are you still going on about that?"

"We have received 43 complaints from the management of Olympia Dome. They wish to know why you destroyed those UUV motorboats when they were sent to save you from the attack."

"I thought they wanted the athletes to have the self defense capabilities to protect themselves. Both from bodyguards and the athletes' own abilities. It was their fault for being so sloppy in how they used those UUVs."

"Apparently each of those UUV motorboats costs 700 thousand dollars. You destroyed three of them. The management is requesting we pay for those and for the repairs to the moveable breakwater's latch that you blew up."

"If they don't like it, tell them they should buy insurance next time. I could introduce them to the company my PMC air force works with."

"That isn't a bad idea. I think the Blue Area company I use gives you a bonus if you introduce new customers to them."

After Alicia gave a serious response to Mariydi's joke, Lucas Westernrose, the director from Catwalk TV, cut in.

"Hello, yes. It is a shame we were interrupted, yes." The yellow underwater camera that had been made useless during the practice by the jamming signal was sitting on his lap and he was stroking it lightly. "That was such an excellent episode, yes, but the noise in the signal was too strong to air any of the footage, yes. If it had recorded properly, yes, yes, I could have spliced together the footage of the event and that attack and added in some effective background music to make quite a moving show."

"…So you categorize that attack as an opportunity."

"At this rate, even the documentary portion will be a waste, yes. Yes, if nothing happens, we have nothing to show, yes."

While listening to Lucas, Mariydi shook her head in annoyance and spoke to Alicia.

She was returning to the original topic.

"Those UUVs were extras. Who were the original attackers?"

"The Legitimacy Kingdom for sure. We retrieved fingerprints, blood samples, and other information from the corpses you made. We are currently using that information to investigate the Legitimacy Kingdom forces here, but that is nothing more than obtaining confirmation of what we already know."

It was not a criminal investigation, so they did not need to narrow it down to specific individuals.

Basically, they just had to gain a general idea of what world power was their enemy. That was why Mariydi was not too worried.

To her, it was nothing more than having people she already saw as her enemies undergo a class change to people she could kill with impunity.

Mariydi had saved an enemy athlete from the Information Alliance, but that did not mean she wanted to be a saint who would try to save all athletes and all soldiers equally.

She would save those she could save, but she would kill those she had to kill.

That was how the world worked in the Northern European Restricted Zone where she normally fought.

Meanwhile, the only person more exhausted than that powerful target was her bodyguard.

"Honestly, my boss from my company is mad at me because you decided to go on a rampage on your own. It's so bad I'm a bit worried about his blood pressure. If you're going to do something like that, at least invite me along. That way, I can at least do my duty."

"It's your own fault."

"The second day brought your combined ranking up to 3rd, remember? And you were thrown off your normal pace by sticking right behind the person in 1st the entire time, which adds more muscle fatigue you will have to deal with tomorrow," said Alicia.

"Yes, yes, to be honest, you were too level-headed and in control of everything, yes. You did so well it leaves something to be desired on the emotional side of things, yes. A moving sports story needs some kind of exciting incident, yes."

"If you're doing that well, give me a bite of that cake," said the bodyguard.

"Unfortunately, Stacy brought this for me. The team shares the fees, so you need to ask Alicia since she is in charge of the funds."

"…"

Alicia glared at the bodyguard and the man raised his hands and shook his head. He was exhausted, but he was not about to argue with that woman who took everything too seriously.

That program of a woman ignored him and said, “The sponsor says your results on the second day were excellent. They do agree with Mr. Westernrose that a bit of drama would be nice, but your excellent results are what matter most to them.”

“So blowing up an armored vehicle and fighting a group of frogmen armed with underwater rifles didn’t count as drama?”

“Anything the camera did not pick up or that cannot be shown does not count. We only care about what can be used for advertisement, not what actually happens.”

“Yes, yes,” agreed Lucas Westernrose.

He must have still been upset thinking about the ratings he could have gotten had he been able to use that footage.

If Mariydi died before the event was over, Alicia would be in trouble since she was in charge of advertising the new rifle, but her expression remained blank.

“The final day tomorrow uses bicycles.”

“That sounds easier than what I’ve had to deal with so far.”

“Hello, yes. As far as the events are concerned, yes, yes, the viewers’ focus peaks on the swimming of the second day, yes, because of the swimsuits, yes, yes. But since you insist on wearing your flight jacket all the way through, yes, you are lacking as far as that is concerned, yes.”

"If you insist on keeping that joke going any longer, you had damn well better be prepared! And the swimsuits draw more ratings than the race that determines the winner? This competition really is all about show business, isn't it!?"

"Yes, yes, we have suggested before that they move the swimming to the final day, yes."

"The bicycle event is not easy. For one, it has the greatest distance of the three. You must bike for 120 kilometers, so it wears down your stamina horribly. And all of the muscle fatigue from the previous days remains, so there is a large risk of pulling a muscle," explained Alicia. "And the sharpshooting is supposedly hardest as well. After all, you must use both hands to aim the sniper rifle at the target while riding the bicycle."

"…That is not a skill you would ever need on the battlefield."

"This is a sport," replied Alicia with the world's lamest explanation. She continued speaking with her spine stretched out straight like she was performing some sort of exercise. "At any rate , tomorrow is the final day of the shootathlon. Sportsmanship does not matter at all, so please do not make even the slightest mistake so that you can achieve the best advertisement for the sponsor's new rifle."

Part 2

Before heading back to her room in the resort hotel, Mariydi stopped by Stacy's place. The Technopic Village that Mariydi

stayed in was meant for the athletes, so her support members had to use a different hotel. Since every athlete had dozens of other people supporting them, there really was no other option.

That woman who was easily swept up in fads looked delighted at her small visitor.

"What are you here for? Do you want to give me your autograph?"

"Do you have anything I can eat for a late-night snack? Something like a hot dog would be great."

"Oh? I thought you just finished eating dinner?"

"I'm not going to eat it now. Would you rather I wake you up in the middle of the night when I get hungry? I'm not allowed to eat or drink anything from the normal stores, remember?"

"Hmm. I guess you are a growing girl."

"…Where do you think you're looking?"

"But will the nutrients actually go where you want them?"

"Again, where do you think you're looking!?"

Stacy did not seem fazed by Mariydi's anger. She headed back into her hotel room and began looking through a refrigerator that was much too big to have come with the room.

"You said a hot dog would be fine, right?"

"It just has to be something to prevent me from being too hungry to sleep. It doesn't have to be all that substantial."

"It would be simplest to just take a sleeping pill, but…Hm?"

Stacy let out an odd voice while sticking her head into the refrigerator and rummaging through it.

Mariydi frowned.

"What is it?"

"I'm out of lettuce."

"I don't need any. You just need a bun and a sausage for a hot dog."

"No!!" Despite it being 10 at night, Stacy let out a cry that rivaled the roars of the crowd in the stadium. "Lettuce is important . Incredibly important! With just a bun, butter, and a sausage, it will be way too greasy!! And then if you add ketchup and mustard , you have something that doesn't even count as food!!"

"I was just asking for something that is anything like a hot dog. "

"Without the moist lettuce, it isn't a hot dog!! You can't just replace it with cabbage or something! Oh, no. I need to head to the team HQ and secure some supplies!!"

"Just give me a sausage!! That's enough!!" shouted Mariydi, but Stacy ignored her.

She grabbed Mariydi's hand and half-dragged her out of the hotel room.

When the bodyguard who was waiting outside in the hallway saw them, he asked, "What happened?"

"I'm learning something about Stacy's household preferences. Dammit!!"

"…If possible, I'd like something for myself as well. Late night bodyguard work makes me hungry."

Stacy completely ignored their conversation and continued on through the hotel with Mariydi in tow.

It seemed each team had their equipment stored in rented storage rooms located in the hotel's basement. Capitalist Corporations guards were deployed there as well.

Stacy rummaged through an industrial refrigerator that was practically a small refrigerated room. The look in her eyes only returned to normal once she found the lettuce.

"…Hoo. Now I can make a perfect hot dog."

"Have you completely forgotten your initial goal?" said Mariydi in shock as they headed for the elevator.

Stacy's room was on the 20th floor, but the elevator stopped at a floor before that. It was the floor the lounge was located on. The bodyguard who was wearing a bulletproof jacket immediately raised his guard, but Mariydi found an attack unlikely. There was close to zero chance of someone gaining information on an unscheduled outing like this.

But something Mariydi was truly not expecting appeared on the other side of the elevator door.

"We can't have that. The Technopics is full of plots and attacks, so I will escort you," said Alicia with a huge smile.

She was trying to enter the elevator while clinging to the arm of the PR manager of the sponsor company.

Mariydi Whitewitch had continually fought in the long-drawn out wars of the Northern European Restricted Zone where the use of Objects was banned. Her expression would remain completely unchanged even while sitting atop an enemy soldier and smashing his head open with a large rock. But this sight caused her mind to go completely blank.

Alicia's eyes met Mariydi's as the girl's mouth silently flapped open and closed. She then spotted the bodyguard and Stacy on the elevator. It was just an instant, but her smile definitely froze over.

Would her pride or her sense of business win out?

As a true member of the Capitalist Corporations, she chose the path that led to money.

No one had pressed the close button, but the elevator door started to close on its own. Alicia grabbed it and forced it back open.

By then her smile had completely returned and she was once more nestling up against the young PR manager from the sponsor company at the ideal angle and with the ideal strength.

"Don't you think there isn't enough to drink at the bar? I may not look it, but I know quite a bit about cocktails. If you like, I could make some for you in my room."

"E-excuse me. Excuse me a moment! You are Miss Whitewitch, the athlete my company is supporting, correct!?"

While Alicia continued to lean up against him, the PR manager spoke to Mariydi.

With a suspicious look, she said, "Yes?"

"I have just been assaulted with praises for 3 hours straight. I'm a bit afraid my internal sense has been thrown off balance. If you don't mind, could you insult me so I can realign myself?"

(As much as you act like you don't, I take it you actually like having a beauty like Alicia clinging to you like that.)

With that thought, Mariydi looked at the man with a horribly icy look.

"So you're some *** of a mental *** bastard who can't get a boner without looking at a girl holding a giant gun? Get back to your dismal house and start licking a doll or something."

The PR manager crouched down facing into a corner of the elevator.

"…Sorry. That was a bit more than I was expecting."

"It was a request from my sponsor. I had to go all out."

"Oh? If that is what you like, I could insult you too."

The elevator stopped at another floor and Alicia and the PR manager headed down the hallway. After a few steps, Alicia turned back toward the elevator and threatened Mariydi and the others with a horribly obscene gesture using her thumb.

The door closed again and an awkward silence fell over the elevator.

"…I guess there really is no business you can easily make money in."

Mariydi's muttered words touched on one of the major truths of the Capitalist Corporations.

Part 3

The next day, Mariydi Whitewitch went through her usual routine of using a fist to silence the hard rock coming from her alarm clock, drinking some carbonated water, taking a lukewarm shower, giving up her battle with the dryer, donning her yellow and black flight jacket, and moving the chair and magazine rack away from the door.

With an expression like he could not stand it, her bodyguard said, "I might be a bit more motivated in my job if you would show some sign you trusted me. This job will be over soon, so I would like at least some nice memories."

"So you want me to thank you and call you 'big brother'? You're such a pervert."

"!?"

"…What?"

"N-nothing. Anyway, I'll just be doing my job. I just hope I can put this final day behind me without too much trouble."

"…Oh, well my sixth sense is warning me of danger," said Mariydi offhandedly while looking down the hallway in both directions. "I have to eat Stacy's breakfast, right? Should I just wait here?"

"If you want some nutrition blocks, I have some here."

"Those things just provide you with the nutrients without filling your stomach. Don't you feel like you're losing out that way ? On the battlefield is one thing, but this is a safe country where food is everywhere."

"Well, they taste better than military rations. And I would hesitate to call Olympia Dome a safe country."

"I overslept," muttered Stacy as she pushed a room service cart their way. She did indeed look as if she had only just gotten out of bed. "So the menu for today's breakfast was thrown together at the last second. It's centered on toast and a salad. But I forced the needed nutrients into it, so don't worry."

"…I'm a bit worried about what you mean by 'forced'."

"Hm. I'm thankful I have these commercial nutrition blocks."

Mariydi tried to grab the nutrition block the bodyguard was holding, but Stacy grabbed her by the back of the neck with a smile .

Mariydi gave up but continued a small bit of resistance by lightly glaring at Stacy.

"At the very least, tell me what you mixed in."

"Hmm, do you know what ascorbic acid is?"

"Uuhh…!?"

Since this caused Mariydi to flinch back, it seemed her knowledge was focused mainly on things related to war.

Still smiling, Stacy said, "Ah ha ha. It's just vitamin C. Even if you have to explain something, you can alter the effect of that explanation based on the words you choose."

As Stacy messed with Mariydi like that, Alicia walked over from the elevator hall.

This was after their encounter the night before.

They all secretly focused on Alicia to see what she would say about it.

"Good morning. Are you ready for me to go over the schedule with you?"

"Nothing changed!?"

"Well, we were wrong to expect anything cute out of such a boring woman."

"Hmm, Alicia doesn't seem to mind that she's wasting the time she has before she is too old to get married."

They all gave voice to their varied opinions, but Alicia stood as tall as ever.

Part 4

After finishing breakfast, Mariydi walked around the outer circumference of the fried egg shaped Olympia Dome. She even walked through the pedestrian area of the seven bridges of the Bifröst Arch which was one of the prime sightseeing spots.

None of the main events had begun yet, so the sightseers were still scattered out among the souvenir shops rather than in the event grounds. Children swinging around helium balloons and couples wearing T-shirts modeled after group sport uniforms were walking about. A youth who may have been looking forward to the final day of the shootathlon aimed his cameras at Mariydi. She prayed he was not just a pervert.

"I didn't take you for the type to go sightseeing," said Mariydi's bodyguard, but she did not seem to care.

"I just wanted to see what is so enjoyable about it," she replied while watching the glittering waterway spreading out beyond the handrail. "No real service is provided. It's just a place. And yet people are willing to pay money to go there. In my time in the Northern European Restricted Zone, I have killed people in the wars caused by that type of flow of money. The total sum of money gathered in Olympia Dome is probably more than the entire financial activity related to the Northern European Restricted Zone. I wanted to see with my own eyes just what value these places have."

"Did you find your answer?"

"I've learned that a lot of people have a different sense of value from me."

No strong emotion could be seen in Mariydi's eyes.

All that was there was displeasure over being unable to understand something.

She felt no curiosity.

With those relatively emotionless eyes, she stated her opinion.

"It makes me feel uncomfortable to know that I am a part of it as an athlete. I have a feeling I have no business carrying the burden of a portion of that economic activity when I do not even understand its value. But nevertheless, my actions have an effect on the ratings and intensify negotiations over broadcasting rights. It may not be the same as what I am used to, but this is a battlefield

that revolves around economic activity. I would be lying if I said I did not feel a responsibility to comprehend the true nature of this competition so I can play my role better."

Mariydi's expression was perfectly serious as she said that.

In her opinion, one should completely crush an enemy and it was a common courtesy to give your all against any enemy.

Stacy the pharmacist had previously joked about Mariydi being at "that age" while at the Bifröst Arch.

Coincidentally, a similar opinion floated up in the bodyguard's mind.

(The value of the athletes here can change just by overtaking another athlete in popularity, so the cameras are often attempting to get shots that look like something from a pin-up model's image video. The design of the uniforms often takes that into account. But it may be better not to mention that to someone her age that likes everything to be nice and clean.)

The bodyguard kept his mouth shut based on the double reasoning that real adults explained away their own weaknesses using the reasoning that staying silent was the adult thing to do.

His bodyguard PMC had been hired to resolve any problems, but he was not about to cause extra problems that could be avoided.

Part 5

After using up the rest of her free time, Mariydi headed outside the Technopic Village resort hotel. She was headed out to tune up the sports bicycle she would be using for the third day of the shootathlon.

But…

"Catwalk TV sure is heavily equipped this time. I think you stand out more than I do."

"Yes, yes, yes. We lost such excellent footage due to the jamming last time. Yes, we want to be perfectly defended against that this time, yes," said Lucas Westernrose while using hand signals to give instructions to several cameramen who were carrying devices large enough one would think they could shoot through a tank's armor.

At first glance, it sounded as if they were enthusiastic about their work, but…

"Are you that intent on filming me getting shot?"

"Hello? We are not so imprudent that we would use a performer as bait to get footage of a lion. Yes, but if we do not keep things at the line of the performer very nearly getting eaten, we would not have a show, yes, yes."

While operating a handheld device, Alicia broke straight through that conversation with a mechanical voice.

"Basically, you will be using the kind of bicycle used for road races. It is against the rules to attach any electronic devices such as sensors or gyros. But we have received permission to add weights to aid in manual control, so it should be much less likely to fall over than a normal bicycle."

Mariydi carefully observed the bicycle that had J-shaped handlebar grips and was specially designed to incline forward.

"The back wheel has 7 gears and the pedal axle has 5 for a total of 35 different options. However, repeated extreme gear changes over a short period could cause the chain to come loose. You can only learn its limits via experience."

"Okay. So you're telling me to intentionally mess up during practice?" Mariydi swung her right leg up and over the back wheel to straddle the bicycle frame. "I can be pretty flashy with it, but is this from a sponsor too?"

"It was provided by one, but a fairly low rank one. As a general rule, the size of the sponsor's name on your flight jacket directly correlates to the priority we give that sponsor. You need not forcibly appeal to the abilities of the bicycle. Focus primarily on the rifle."

"…So I have to figure the specifics out for myself," muttered Mariydi in annoyance as she began pedaling that high quality bicycle that probably cost more than 10,000 dollars.

A Catwalk TV cameraman followed behind Mariydi filming her from some kind of electric unicycle.

They were on a large circular cycling course located just outside the central dome facility of Olympia Dome.

The Technopics was a competition in which many interests crossed paths and it was largely functioned as a proxy war, but that cycling course was quite a comfortable place for Mariydi with the ocean breeze wrapping around her.

(Dammit… Maybe I should just run off…)

Mariydi gave a small bit of serious thought to an idea that could very well make her a wanted criminal, but she still had enough sense to realize it was an unrealistic idea. She repeatedly changed gears to intentionally knock the chain loose, checked on the quickest method to fix the chain, and let go with both hands to mime holding a rifle while pedaling. Like that, she gathered all the information she needed for the actual event. It was tedious work and she was doubtful any kind of narration played over it could turn it into a profitable television show.

Her bodyguard asked a question from an electric machine similar to a golf cart running alongside her.

“How are you feeling?”

“That’s one horribly lame vehicle you’re riding around.”

"Well, this is a cycling course. You're only allowed to use certain types of vehicles. Or would you prefer I sit behind you on the bike?"

"It's a road race bike, so it has no room for anyone else. But if you want to have your crotch destroyed by the back wheel, I won't stop you."

"So what's it like trying to shoot while pedaling a bike? I just can't imagine trying it."

"It's going to be difficult to keep my balance while peering down the scope."

"Yeah, humans use their sight to keep their balance. I guess it's the same as how it gets a lot harder to balance on one leg if you close your eyes."

"Don't act like you understand. Closing your eyes just cuts off all information. Peering down a scope gives you a completely new set of information. Pedaling a bike while aiming for a target in a perpendicular direction is going to be a real pain in the ass."

"…Well, I'm just glad I don't have to do it."

Mariydi was tempted to shoot him for how casual he was about it, but unfortunately she did not have a firearm on her.

As she continued pedaling the bicycle, Alicia spoke over the piezoelectric receiver in her ear.

"The final day of the shootathlon begins at 2 PM. Direct sunlight is at its strongest during that time period. Please be careful."

"What, are you telling me to put on sunscreen?"

"I am talking about your stamina," replied Alicia.

Mariydi laughed scornfully at that.

The set cycling course was 120 kilometers long. She supposed that must qualify as heavy labor in a safe country protected by an Object.

The Northern European Restricted Zone had no such guaranteed safety, so it was not too unusual to be told to run over 300 kilometers across an unpaved mountain path.

Alicia had not noticed her expression because they were speaking via radio, but the bodyguard could see it.

"You sure are confident," he said.

The look on her face must have appeared charming because she heard the sound of the Catwalk TV camera lens adjusting its focus.

Mariydi ignored it and replied, "I simply haven't found anything to worry about in the specs of the equipment. If I'm worried about anything, it's about possible interference during the event itself."

"Once it begins, there will be no large scale interference. It would be simple enough to pull off, but any mistake would be caught by countless cameras and bring international shame on them. Also, anyone with an interest in interfering also wants their own athlete to do well. If they go too far, the event itself could be cancelled," explained the bodyguard in a tone so cheerful it sounded like he would start whistling at any moment. "The shootathlon ends today. Once the results are recorded, they will have no more reason to interfere. And it would be difficult for them to manage anything during the event itself."

"Your point?"

"That the most dangerous time is right now. If we can get through this safely, the risk will be almost entirely gone."

The large camera suddenly moved in closer as if it had been waiting for those words.

Part 6

And with no unofficial interference, the result was as clear as day.

Once the award ceremony was over, Mariydi had stood in front of the cameras and microphones for a while with her pure gold medal and her trophy modeled after a globe. She had tried to get Alicia to put an end to such annoyances, but that woman merely stood tall, said "What do you think this competition is for? Go and advertise that rifle as much as you can", and then left.

As a result, Mariydi was sitting in the back seat of an off-road vehicle feeling more intensely exhausted than after the event itself and rubbing her eyes to recover from the strobe light effect of all the camera flashes.

Mariydi pressed the heavy trophy into the hands of the bodyguard sitting next to her and spoke into the piezoelectric receiver still in her ear.

She was speaking to Alicia who had already returned to the hotel.

"Happy now?"

"Yes. First place in the women's shootathlon is not bad at all."

"I think this is when you're supposed to say 'good job'."

"It is still too soon for that. You still have a photo shoot for advertisements in specialty magazines, an interview for a military website, a gathering of medal winners, and other places to show up and smile. You need to speak the sponsor's name at least once every three minutes and keep the rifle in the frame at all times."

"What a pain. The PMC never taught me how to train my facial muscles. I think I'm going to have some muscle pain tomorrow."

Meanwhile, the off-road vehicle Mariydi was in headed out.

And it was not alone. It was part of a convoy made up of 6 vehicles. As soldiers holding light machineguns had their upper

bodies sticking out from the roofs, it was certainly not how one would expect an athlete in a "peaceful festival" would travel.

The inside of the vehicle had not had enough space for Catwalk TV's large cameras, so Director Lucas Westernrose was filming Mariydi from the side using a small CCD.

While fiddling with the globe-shaped trophy Mariydi had tossed him, the bodyguard said, "Your safety is more or less assured for the time being."

"Yes, yes, yes. I had thought you were just an unlucky draw that might be able to just barely make ends meet, yes, yes. I never thought you would make it this far! Since you also saved Erie Greenhat of the Information Alliance, yes, you should draw in plenty of viewers, yes!!"

Mariydi folded her arms and glared at her bodyguard.

"…Your contract isn't over yet. Don't let your guard down."

"I will of course do my best, but the shootathlon is over. No one would gain anything by attacking you now, so no one's going to try it. For all intents and purposes my bodyguard duty is over."

"So the event is over," muttered Mariydi as she watched the scenery outside the window.

The bodyguard grinned and said, "Are you going to miss all this?"

"I'm just sad my time off is coming to an end."

"You're at least going to stay in Olympia Dome until the closing ceremony, right? You can enjoy a pure vacation until then. Eat as much delicious food as you like and just lie out in the sun. With the event over, you're freed from Miss Stacy's dietary restrictions and your sponsors are paying for all your expenses. I'm sure they won't turn anything down after you won the gold."

"…Maybe I should try the world's three greatest delicacies all at once."

"You're quite a childish ace pilot if you think the more expensive the delicacy, the more delicious they are."

"Hello? I will be using that, yes. Those surprising faults in an otherwise perfect person can score a lot of points, yes, yes."

"I'm just so used to the battlefield that I have no idea how to live extravagantly," commented Mariydi offhandedly.

Since she had won the gold medal, she could spend her remaining time as a hero. Drawing all the unwanted attention was exhausting, but she would at least be given excellent service without having to bother with being courteous or tipping.

(In the camera frame at least, I'm being idolized as a well-liked mascot that is worth more than just jacking off to. I guess I should at least live up to that.)

Mariydi stretched her arms up to stretch her back and said, " Then how about we go around to a few restaurants once we get back to the Technopic Village."

"If you're up for that, you must be healthy enough."

"Since the sponsors are paying for everything, maybe I should go find a casino."

"Call me if you're playing roulette. I'll give you some good luck as long as I get a 10% cut."

As those two members of the Capitalist Corporations spoke, a fairly serious look appeared in their eyes.

"Hmm, but filming is not allowed in casinos… Hello?" muttered Lucas Westernrose, but they ignored him.

Just as they began working up a plan to get around Alicia who held the purse strings, something happened.

The off-road vehicle in the convoy driving directly in front of Mariydi's was blown directly to the side.

At first, an orange light was burned into her eyes.

The sound of an explosion rang out and the supposedly bulletproof windshield had countless cracks run through it. The pressure Mariydi felt in her chest stopped her breathing for a short moment.

The off-road vehicle that had exploded in front of them continued on and struck a coconut tree on the side of the road.

Mariydi's senses could not keep up with the fact that her own off-road vehicle had come to a quick stop.

Despite how much Lucas Westernrose had wanted something exciting to happen, he lost his cool and dropped his camera as soon as it happened while he was in the middle of it.

Mariydi gave voice to what had happened…no, what was still happening in front of her.

"Was that a recoilless rifle!? Is this an attack!?"

The bodyguard used a hand to cover Mariydi's mouth and spoke harshly into his radio.

"Second was taken out. First, Third, calculate out where the attack came from and begin a barrage! Fourth, Fifth, get between my Zero while we get out of here!! Can you hear me, First, Third!? Dammit!!"

Another narrow trail of smoke cut in a straight line through the air and struck the side of the leading vehicle. Sinister explosive flames spewed out as the off-road car's frame and the lives within were blown apart.

Mariydi immediately made up her mind.

"I'm getting out."

"Are you crazy? It may not look it, but this vehicle has the bare minimum of bulletproofing. Surely all your time in the Northern European Restricted Zone was enough to tell you how dangerous it would be to get out!"

"Can that bulletproofing stop an anti-tank recoilless rifle!? A half-assed shield is nothing but a restraint. And they're trying to find the vehicle I'm in. At this rate, all of your men will be taken out in the confusion of this preemptive strike!!"

"Your sentiments are moving, but we aren't going to use the person we were hired to protect as a decoy after getting paid. That would be too disgraceful."

"Your sense of duty is admirable, but I can't let innocent lives get caught up in this. Even if he loves nothing better than the misfortune of others, this man from Catwalk TV is still from a safe country. If I don't get out, every single vehicle will be blown to pieces. And this one is no exception!"

"Sorry, but our job is to keep you alive and nothing more. If you are trying to blur the line between professional and amateur, give it up."

"I see." Mariydi turned off the safety of the handgun she was holding. "Then I'll just have to do this on my own. You can say you took the best action as a bodyguard, but that it failed because I panicked."

"Shit!? Not again. When did you swipe that from my holster!?"

Mariydi ignored the bodyguard and opened the bulletproof door. She crouched down while quickly moving away from the convoy on her own.

The enemy reacted immediately.

Smoke from the recoilless rifles was still floating in midair, but she could see the face of a man holding an assault rifle peering out from the thicket the smoke led back to. However, Mariydi fired the handgun again and again before he could fire.

"Leaving a spot after firing is one of the basics, you idiot."

She could tell multiple people were moving behind cover. Before those people could send bullets her way, Mariydi quickly leapt into a nearby building.

She knew she could not defeat all of them with just that handgun.

She had two options.

She could focus on running away without worrying about defeating this enemy.

Or she could acquire more firepower somewhere and begin a counterattack.

The real problem was that the decision did not entirely lie in Mariydi's hands. Unlike a certain island nation, civilians were

allowed to carry guns, so finding one would probably not be too difficult. But even so, the idea of a counterattack was out of the question if she could not find any nearby.

Suddenly, the deep sound of gunfire repeatedly stabbed into Mariydi's ears. At first she assumed the enemy had brought out a light machinegun, but she was wrong.

The bodyguard had gotten out of the off-road vehicle and was running her way. He had removed the light machinegun from the roof of the vehicle and was firing it from the hip to hold back the attackers.

After he charged into the entrance to the building, he tossed his assault rifle to Mariydi and wiped sweat from his brow.

"I'm going along with your plan, so how about a tip?"

"…You're still focused on making money?" commented Mariydi in annoyance.

She lowered the zipper of her yellow and black skintight flight jacket, revealing some white skin, and reached a hand inside. Mariydi usually only used cards and electronic money, but she always carried a bit of change for the time when she had to tip someone. In the Capitalist Corporations, it was common knowledge that a customer who did not tip would not even be told where the exit was.

Meanwhile, the bodyguard lightly shook his head.

"To be honest, this is well beyond my normal business operations. A bit of change isn't going to cut it."

"Then what *do* you want?"

"A magic incantation."

"?"

"Something like 'Chichin Puipui'. You can think of it as an activation password if you like."

When the bodyguard whispered that magic incantation into her ear, Mariydi's expression grew all the more dubious.

But they would end up surrounded by the attackers if they stayed where they were for too long.

She lightly clenched her right fist, brought it up to her mouth, and spoke in a delicate voice while looking up at the bodyguard.

"Big brother, will you stay with me to the end?"

"That'll do it. I'll set one foot inside hell for that!!"

Mariydi sighed and returned to her normal voice.

"Sigh. After all this time, it turns out you're just a pervert."

"No, you've got it all wrong. I actually have a little sister who is quite a bit younger than me. We were separated thanks to our parents' divorce, and you remind me of her a bit."

"That's hard to deal with in a different way from a pervert. To be honest, I'm not quite sure what to say…"

(But it does seem to have given him a boost of motivation, so I'll work him like a horse.)

After that added thought, Mariydi said, "Anyway, what happened to your men?"

"I told them to start a barrage to buy time and then retreat. Their fate is up to luck and their own skill now."

That sounded coldhearted, but one could not get through a battlefield on guts alone. Ordering them to fall back at their own individual discretion gave some hope to those men who were at a horrible disadvantage. Whether they could make use of that opportunity literally was up to luck and their own skill.

"What about the man from Catwalk TV?"

"It seems my men are surprisingly overflowing with customer service. For a fee of course."

"Did they force some exorbitant price on him during those explosions?"

"There are some businesses that only pay well in situations like this." The bodyguard fired a burst of light machinegun fire out of the building's entrance. "The bigger problem is you. What is even going on here? The event is already over. Even if they kill you now , it won't change the results."

Mariydi then heard a familiar voice over her piezoelectric receiver.

It was Alicia who had returned to the hotel ahead of them.

"I have heard what happened. Can you determine the identity of the attackers from the weapons they are using and their method of attack?"

"The recoilless rifles looked like a Legitimacy Kingdom base. But there is a precedent of the Faith Organization using plundered weapons, so we can't trust that. I think they did even have anti-tank weapons made to match the Legitimacy Kingdom caliber ."

"So are they Legitimacy Kingdom? Or are they Faith Organization?"

"I'm saying I don't know! It could also be the Legitimacy Kingdom using Faith Organization weapons!!"

"…That will make it difficult to figure out what is going on."

"Why am I being targeted now? The results of the event have already been decided!"

"We have a guess." Alicia had to have been able to hear the gunfire and explosions, but she replied as if it was completely unrelated to her. "Generally, the shootathlon results cannot be

overturned once they have been announced, but there are a few exceptions. The results of a doping test after the event or inappropriate conduct at the award ceremony are two examples."

"They take the medal from you?"

"I do not know if it is actually possible, but some idiot might still try it as a last resort. They might be planning to kidnap you and torture you in front of a camera so the entire world can see you pathetically begging for your life."

"…Seriously?"

"Well, I doubt they would actually strip you of your medal for that, but it is possible. So please try not to get captured. And please do not beg for your life. At the very least, face your fate bravely as a true representative of our nation. That should at the very least preserve the results of the event. If any of the sponsors' names or the rifle appear in any of this, we will go as far as to rip out your organs or your genetic code to compensate for the losses."

"To hell with that!! How fucked up is this sports festival!? I'd rather head right back into the battlegrounds of the Northern European Restricted Zone!!"

"What are you going to do?" asked her bodyguard while he swapped out the box magazine for the light machinegun.

Mariydi looked around grimly.

"I thought any interference would only be during the event, so I thought I just had to make it through these few days. But if they're trying to strip me of my medal after the fact, the danger could continue for months. That's why I want to crush the source of the danger while I can see it."

"My personal suggestion would be to run away, but I'll stick with your recklessness as long as my contract lasts."

"Heh," laughed Mariydi as she pulled the cocking lever of her assault rifle. "Well, I at least have a proper weapon now. That means I can choose the other option."

Part 7

Now then.

Who has the advantage, the one being chased or the one doing the chasing?

At this point, it was about 50/50. No one could say who had the advantage and who had the disadvantage.

And that meant this was the point at which that could be controlled.

And what would change it was quite simple.

It hinged on whether one could read one's enemy's upcoming actions or not.

Mariydi and her bodyguard spoke while running down a flight of stairs leading to the basement of the building.

"Can you call up a diagram of this area!?"

"We just ran underground where I can't get a signal," replied the bodyguard while operating a handheld device with one hand. "But Olympia Dome is a giant artificial island, so its underground …or rather, its inside was made into a large scale facility where they concentrate the pipes, network, and other necessary infrastructure. The layout is pretty complicated, but the walls should at least be strong enough to block a bullet."

The bodyguard showed the handheld device's screen to Mariydi.

It seemed he had just barely managed to download a diagram of the layout before losing the signal.

Mariydi wrinkled her brow and said, "The entrance."

"Yeah, that would be the standard method."

Mariydi and the bodyguard passed through the straight passageway heading out from the entrance they had come through and stopped once they turned a corner. After moving that bare minimum of distance down the passageway, they turned the barrels of their guns toward the entrance.

They would concentrate their fire when the pursuing attackers headed down the stairs.

By falling back while their enemy was then overcome with confusion, Mariydi and the bodyguard could quickly head even further down the passageway without worrying about the pursuers getting too close.

They would do the same at the next corner.

And the next corner.

But at the corner after that, they would hide an explosive device instead.

By ambushing the enemy at every corner they absolutely had to pass through to continue their pursuit, Mariydi and the bodyguard slowly but surely reduced the number of attackers with their sporadic gunfire. Whenever they estimated the enemy would have figured out the pattern, they would set up a trap. Each time they did that, they would dull the attackers' instincts.

While they calmly retreated some more, the bodyguard asked, "What do you think?"

"The Faith Organization."

"But the rifle bullets seem to be a Legitimacy Kingdom model."

"For the most part, they aren't using their lights in the dark. Using the lights offensively to blind the enemy is a Faith Organization tactic."

In an age in which firearms and goggles were equipped with sensors, flashlights were no longer necessary. Those that still liked

to use them did so more to blind the enemy with the bright light than to hold back the darkness.

While looking a bit impressed, the bodyguard said, “So when do you think they’ll catch on?”

“When people think they are the pursuers, a counterattack only makes them angry. As long as you keep throwing more branches on a fire, you can keep it burning forever.”

That was exactly why Mariydi and the bodyguard were choosing to continually fall back.

It was like someone who kept putting more and more money into a crane game or like someone who just could not stop playing poker in a casino.

That feeling of being just a bit away from one’s goal would keep the person playing. They would not realize their mistake until their wallet was empty.

It was because the repeated losses were so small and seemingly insignificant that the desire to win them back was greater than the desire to cut your losses.

“No matter how much training they undergo, people are still people in the end.”

“What? Is it over already?” said the bodyguard as he fired his light machinegun around the corner and at the final few people.

Mariydi told him to stop with a gesture and then fired her assault rifle down the passageway.

She did something different this time.

Mariydi blew away all but one of the pursuers and then fired at the wall near the survivor, sending orange sparks everywhere.

She was clearly trying to fill him with fear.

When he saw the Faith Organization attacker fall into a panic and truly start to flee, the bodyguard let out a bewildered voice.

"Should you really have done that? By not finishing them all off , you now have to live in fear of another attack."

"I did that specifically to avoid having to do that," said Mariydi while cautiously peering down the passageway. "We have no idea how large an organization we're dealing with. If they have several other units prepared, slaughtering this one does not eliminate the threat. That is why I let one get away. …He can lead us back to their headquarters."

"What a pain," said the bodyguard while shaking his head.

She would expose her own body to the threat of being shot to keep any civilians or members of her bodyguard team from harm, but she also showed no mercy in crushing those who she saw as an enemy. He could not tell if she liked or disliked blood.

Mariydi glanced over at the bodyguard.

"And be careful. Pursuing the fleeing attacker means we have to head back through the passageways we booby trapped. You don't want to fall victim to your own trap, do you?"

Part 8

Mariydi and the bodyguard climbed a stairway back up to the surface and exited the building. Reinforcements from the bodyguard PMC had already arrived, so they borrowed one of their vehicles. Instead of a professional military off-road vehicle, it was a standard 4-door car that would not look out of place driving through a normal city.

The Faith Organization attacker whose heart had fallen firmly into the grasp of his survival instincts after all of his allies had been killed was not paying any attention to his surroundings.

After driving 10 kilometers in a vehicle of his own, he arrived at a rental storehouse far removed from the center of the island.

The attacker got out of his vehicle, but Mariydi took action before he could approach the door to the storehouse.

She approached silently from behind and kicked the back of his knees to throw him off balance. Before he could turn around or shout out, she wrapped her arms around his neck and mercilessly snapped it.

"Excellent work," commented the bodyguard.

"The scary thing about the Technopics is that this didn't count as a crime."

"Yeah, self defense is defined pretty broadly here. Of course, without that broad definition, we wouldn't have been attacked in the first place"

Mariydi searched through the pockets of the limp dead body and found a key. She cautiously approached the storehouse and unlocked the small personnel entrance located next to the giant shutter.

She glanced over the inside with her assault rifle at the ready, but it did not seem anyone was there.

(There are signs of people heading in and out very recently.)

She and the bodyguard checked around inside the storehouse, but found no one hiding inside. They had either all headed out for some mission or another or they had fled for fear of their comrade leading someone back to them.

"It doesn't look like they left any 'presents' for us," said the bodyguard while lowering his light machinegun.

He was referring to explosives.

If they had detected Mariydi and the bodyguard's actions and fled, it was very likely they would have left behind some kind of booby trap. That meant they had probably left for other reasons.

"Was that all of them? Or are there more? We can't be sure with just this."

"We can just keep an eye on this place. My men can set up a perimeter."

While listening to the bodyguard, Mariydi looked around the inside of the storehouse. Several of what appeared to be some kind of equipment were covered by thick plastic sheets. She had already checked underneath quickly while searching for any "presents".

She removed the cords holding the sheets on and removed them .

Inside she found…

"A VTOL fighter? Is it a Legitimacy Kingdom S/G-31?"

"The exterior is just made to look like it," said Mariydi the ace pilot after giving it a careful look. "The Faith Organization Harpuiai uses the same basic frame. It was designed by an engineer that defected from the Legitimacy Kingdom after all."

She circled around to the back and spotted the distinctive paddle for the jet engine's vector thrust nozzle. It was definitely not from the Legitimacy Kingdom.

It had been a patent issue over the shape of that paddle that led the engineer to defect.

"So it's a Faith Organization design?"

"This fighter has had its exterior modified to hide its identity. It's possible the inside was modified for the same reason. This isn't enough to say whether it is Legitimacy Kingdom or Faith Organization." Mariydi tapped the fighter's body with a loosely clenched fist. "They just had to make sure we couldn't tell what world power they're from. As long as we don't have 100% certainty, each world power can avoid any possible responsibility with the political exchanges they're so good at."

"I thought you had determined the unit we took out was from the Faith Organization."

"Based on their methods. They definitely acted like a Faith Organization unit…but I can't deny the possibility that those were soldiers from a different organization that mastered those movements with help from former Faith Organization soldiers, anyone else who had undergone Faith Organization training, or their intelligence department's analysis of the Faith Organization's training methods."

The armored vehicle and submarine covered by the other plastic sheets had been made to look like Capitalist Corporations and Information Alliance models respectively. Those false exteriors were not simply meant to deceive. The intent was to leave traces of different world powers to make it impossible to tell which power they were from.

The bodyguard sighed.

"We can't tell from this."

"We actually might be able to." Mariydi looked over at the maintenance tools. "They've added elements from multiple world powers to the fighters and armored vehicles that will be seen on the surface, but they would have had no reason to do the same to the equipment that would never see the light of day. We can figure out which power is behind this by checking out their military tools ."

"So what's the verdict?"

"…In all likelihood, they're from the Faith Organization. More specifically, from the Greek mythology branch."

Mariydi used her piezoelectric receiver to ask Alicia, but Alicia replied sounding confused.

"The Greek mythology branch had no decent athletes in the shootathlon. Even if they eliminated all of the medalists, they would not gain anything."

"Then what is going on?"

"I am not from a criminal group, so I could not tell you. But if I had to take a guess, the goal of their attack is something other than stripping you of your medal."

"…"

Mariydi looked around once more and then began searching through the storehouse once more.

As she did, she realized something that should have been there was missing.

"There's no computer. Modern fighters and armored vehicles have advanced precision equipment installed, so a computer is needed for maintenance."

"So they took all that with them?"

"…I can only think of one possibility," muttered Mariydi before exiting the storehouse.

She once more searched the corpse of the attacker lying collapsed outside the entrance. She found a handheld device in the inner pocket of his jacket.

It was locked with a password, but it was done with mere free software. She used a special method to lock up the functions needed for the security and rebooted it with the password lock mode turned off altogether.

"Does a pilot need to know how to do that?"

"I use this sort of device to regulate the fly-by-wire system. When the device screws up and won't do what I tell it, I sometimes have to perform a soft reset."

The device did not have much data in it, but it did have a few addresses leading to special links and a list of authentication codes

. It seemed all the primary data was stored on a server accessed via the internet. Mariydi had no idea how long she would have access, so she just downloaded all of it.

The Blank will stand out too much. The Blank is nothing more than preparations for the real plan. We cannot allow anyone to grow suspicious at this stage.

A progressing problem will be used for the Blank.

We have information that the Legitimacy Kingdom is attacking an athlete from the Capitalist Corporations. We can use this for the Blank.

Camouflage of the needed firearms and armored vehicles has been completed in time. They will now be used for the Blank.

The bodyguard peered over Mariydi's head to read the text on the screen from above.

"This is referring to us, isn't it?"

"It certainly looks like they aren't trying to strip me of my medal. From the looks of this, they aren't even really targeting me at all."

The Blank.

She searched through the files for a bit and found data on that.

Most of Olympia Dome's security is made up of unmanned weapons such as UAVs, UGVs, and UUVs.

If they are not crushed, the real plan will be difficult to execute.

The unmanned weapons do not run on a completely autonomous program. They are constantly manually controlled from a central control room.

The antennae are located all over the island.

Their output is powerful enough that a normal jamming signal will likely fail to completely block the signal.

But to bring together all of the data from the countless antennae, hubs are needed to control the path of the data like traffic lights.

If a hub is destroyed, the unmanned weapons will be temporarily unusable over a rather large block.

Mariydi narrowed her eyes.

"How many recoilless rifles were fired when our convoy was first attacked?"

"I don't remember. I was too busy trying not to die."

"So that's what that was. Even if they fired at a different facility amid the confusion, it would still be deemed an attack on our convoy."

"But this Blank isn't their main goal, right? This said it was just preparation. What is their real plan?"

"Here we go. I found it."

Mariydi scrolled down on the handheld device's screen.

Every last trace of the original sports festival has been lost from the Technopics.

We must put an end to these ruins that are swollen with nothing but depravity and proxy wars.

We of Athletica will return this festival to the original form of the Olympics created by our ancestors from our homeland of Greece.

Athletica.

That seemed to be the name of the organization that was at the center of the current turmoil.

To do that, we must utterly destroy the Technopics and the massive amount of profit it produces as well as Olympia Dome that runs the festival.

Olympia Dome is an impregnable facility guarded by Objects from the great world powers of the Faith Organization, the Legitimacy Kingdom, the Information Alliance, and the Capitalist Corporations. We do not think it can be brought down with a frontal attack.

To sink this giant artificial island, the system that supports it must be used against it.

"…Now we're getting somewhere."

"They want to bring back the Olympic spirit? Is this Athletica we're fighting against trying to make an enemy of the entire Technopic system?"

"But how are they going to sink the island? Four Second Generation Objects are on constant guard."

The world powers' Objects are officially said to be working together to guard Olympia Dome, but their actually reason for being here is to keep each other in check to prevent any single Object from attacking.

A strong stimulus could create a situation where they begin destroying each other.

Firing the first shot will be difficult.

It may be from the same world power as us, but the Faith Organization Object is not a fellow Athletica member.

That means the first shot must be fired with something other than an Object.

It does not have to be enough firepower to destroy the Object. However , it must be enough for the Elite piloting the Object to deem it a threat. It must be powerful enough for the Elite to mistake it for a bombardment from another Object or at least for something the Elite believes an Object bombardment is needed to resolve.

Did a weapon with such firepower even exist?

Object's had armor powerful enough to withstand a direct hit from a nuclear weapon.

As Mariydi operated the handheld device, she found information on what Athletica planned.

What it said was:

In order to appeal to the fact that they have no large scale military might, Olympia Dome supplies power to its unmanned weapons from an outside source.

It uses the three giant Ocean Substation transformer ships.

The great power needed to run over 5000 unmanned weapons is transferred in the form of a laser.

Using that facility, an optical attack powerful enough to damage an Object can be achieved.

We will eliminate the threat of the unmanned weapons with the Blank and use the gap in security to hijack the Ocean Substation.

If the Ocean Substation's high output laser is targeted at an Object, those monsters of the world powers will then begin destroying each other on their own.

And Olympia Dome will be caught in the middle.

Enemy Forces 3

Ramil Scofflaw exited the civilian helicopter storehouse and Iris Aggravation jogged after her carrying a small computer.

Iris spoke to the woman who was not turning around.

"Lieutenant Colonel Scofflaw! The assault members used for the Blank have all been taken out and Motel B they were using has been taken by the Capitalist Corporations!!"

"The destruction of the hub means the Blank was a success. A large area has been created in which Olympia Dome's unmanned weapons cannot be used. Hijacking the Ocean Substation will not be difficult now. We will continue the operation, Warrant Officer Aggravation. We still have Motel A here and as well as Motel C. If we redistribute our resources, we have enough."

Three fighters with VTOL ability had been dragged out to the large concrete plaza in front of the storehouse.

When the unmanned weapons were functioning, they would have been shot down in no time by anti-air missiles or other aerial firepower.

But that was not the case.

"First, these three Harpuiai will destroy all the defense systems on the Ocean Substation's deck. After that, we will board the ship via helicopter and hovercraft. …Don't overdo the initial attack. This will all be for naught if we sink the Ocean Substation."

It may have been because they had entered the final stage of their plan that strength had entered Ramil's voice.

Or perhaps it was because she was a pilot and the topic had shifted to her field of expertise.

Ramil pointed at the screen of the small computer Iris held.

"The 20 minutes after the initial attack are what count. We can't stretch this out beyond that. The Blank has thrown Olympia Dome into confusion. To pull the trigger of a war, we must strike the decisive blow against the Object while information is still confused ."

"Yes, ma'am."

"We will be in charge of taking over the Ocean Substation, but your skills and the program in that computer are needed to weaponize the laser. Do you understand, warrant officer?"

"Of course. We cannot allow the peaceful festival created by our culture to be sullied any further."

The competition known as the Olympics had been lost.

All that remained was a development race of textile material science for the sportswear and pharmaceuticals for the doping, as well as a trade show of guinea pigs created in human experiments. No wholesome sportsmanship remained and the exhilaration of the entire world growing excited as a single whole was gone.

What was moving about the development of athletes to win gold medals in exchange for shorter lifespans?

What was wholesome about a sports competition where, no matter how hard they worked, an athlete that had dropped below 10th place would be violently attacked by the people as soon as they arrived home because the people blamed them for the bets they had lost?

"…We will bring it back," muttered Ramil quietly but with a sense of intimidation that seemed to stab into the human spirit. " We will crush this rotten festival of death and bring back the peaceful festival we once had. That festival that allowed us all to forget about the boundaries of language, religion, nationality, and race between us, even if it was just for a short time. We *will* bring it back."

They knew that their means would involve the lives of everyone on Olympia Dome, the thousands of athletes and millions of spectators, and that it would bring about further tragedy by causing additional wars using Objects around the world, but that did not change Ramil and the others' minds.

They had no duty to protect the lives of those who profited from that rotten competition or those who enthusiastically held gambling tickets in hand while watching those filthy events.

A large number of people gathered around Ramil.

They were the pilots of the fighters, the assault team that would be brought in on the helicopters and hovercrafts, the analysts who managed data in front of the computers, and the maintenance team for the weapons. They were all focused on Ramil.

She had already decided what words she would use to inspire them.

Ramil lifted a hand in to the air as if she was holding out a cup of alcohol and spoke the words.

Those words symbolized the reason for Athletica's existence.

"Glory to the festival."

Chapter 4

Part 1

The situation had grown quite troublesome.

Athletica's ultimate goal was causing a battle between the Objects of the world powers protecting Olympia Dome. Olympia Dome would be caught in the middle and sunk.

That large scale military might was there, but they were unable to ask for help or even explain the situation to them.

The lives of the thousands of athletes, the millions of spectators, and even Mariydi herself could only be saved with the old style of military might that was usually called obsolete.

(Modern wars do not happen unexpectedly. The heads of the world powers only go to war after weighing the gains and losses against each other and carefully calculating everything out. Since Olympia Dome exists outside all that, they might not be able to deal with any disorder here using their usual methods.)

Mariydi thought while charging out of the storehouse.

(I'm sure the higher ups will use all their political tricks to keep the chaos to a minimum. This may not develop into all-out war. But the same cannot be said for the masses at the bottom. The Technopic athletes may be produced behind the scenes, but they are still representatives of the people. If they are killed off, the people won't just sadly back off.)

She gritted her teeth as her speculation headed in a horrible direction.

The worst part was that this speculation had a possibility of becoming a reality.

(If the several thousand athletes are all killed, terrorist attacks within safe countries will increase at an explosive rate. It's already been pointed out that the rates of attacks in safe countries increase after the "accidents" during the Technopics. This could deteriorate into a situation where the distinction between battlefields and safe countries completely collapses. That would mean the complete destruction of the system supported by Objects that allows for a clean era of clean wars. All sorts of economic activity will grind to a halt and society itself will collapse!!)

The vehicles of the bodyguard PMC team gathered in front of the storehouse that was tinged with the orange of twilight. Lucas Westernrose of Catwalk TV was trembling amongst them, but he then started berating himself when he realized he forgot to film what had happened.

Mariydi grabbed her main bodyguard and said, "What is Olympia Dome's management saying!? Have they increased the security for the Ocean Substations!?"

"Who knows." The bodyguard shrugged. "They seem to have been thrown into quite a bit of confusion thanks to the Blank and everything else that is going on. We can't get through even using the emergency lines. Everything is tied up."

"Dammit!"

Mariydi snatched the bodyguard's binoculars and looked out toward the sea.

She could see a ship over 500 meters long stopped a few kilometers out. The shape of the ship was nothing special. It was basically a tanker, but it had four parabolic antennae a few dozen meters across lined up on its flat deck. They were likely meant to receive the microwaves.

"I can't contact Miss Alicia anymore either. With Olympia Dome's own communications network cut off, everyone is using the radio transmissions now. There are so many transmissions being sent out at similar frequencies that everything is filled with noise." The bodyguard clicked his tongue. "In other words, we have no way of knowing what the sponsor's opinion is. I doubt they would actually listen to us though."

"This isn't the time for those intellectuals. If we wait for them to sign off on our actions, Olympia Dome is done for!!"

As soon as she said that, an explosive noise shot by over Mariydi's head.

She put down the binoculars and looked up to see three fighters heading for the Ocean Substation with long, narrow contrails behind them.

They were the VTOL fighters disguised as Legitimacy Kingdom S/G-31s.

"They're making their move! It's Athletica!!'

Lucas Westernrose must have decided anything was fine as long as it recorded because he pulled out his smartphone, started up a video app, and pointed the small lens into the sky. He spoke with his own men who had come directly to him as they could not contact him remotely.

"Hello? Yes, yes, according to the other filming group, yes, yes, the spectators have not begun to panic yet, yes. Yes, with the broadcast cut off, the events have been stopped as well, but most of the spectators are waiting in the dome for the systems to recover . They may have mistaken the fighters, yes, yes, for an acrobatic show to celebrate the end of the women's shootathlon, yes. …And even if they view it as combat, yes, yes, they seem to be accepting it with open arms as more of the standard trouble between athletes here, yes."

The bodyguard looked up at the source of the contrails and muttered, "The UUV ships in this area are unusable. I'm sure they can operate the Ocean Substation's defense systems manually, but …"

"We can't count on those things! A battle between air and ship is practically over by the time the fighters can approach the ship!!"

Orange lines from tracer bullets scattered from the deck and white trails of smoke signified the launch of anti-air missiles.

But no apparent damage was done to the fighters.

When the three Athletica fighters passed over the Ocean Substation, over half of the defense systems were blown away by machinegun fire. After pulling some distance away, the fighters circled around and approached again. This time, they shot up the soldiers who were using shoulder-fired anti-air missiles.

The bodyguard groaned and said, “It’s just a slaughter.”

“But it isn’t over yet. Once the defense systems on the deck are destroyed, the main Athletica force will move to board it. Once they gain control, they will use the laser power delivery system to attack the Objects. And then the Objects will begin fighting amongst themselves. Once that happens, Olympia Dome will be destroyed.”

Mariydi operated the handheld device she had acquired from the Faith Organization Athletica soldier she had killed.

She had no idea where they had gotten it, but it included a supposedly classified diagram of the Ocean Substation.

“The Ocean Substation is nothing more than a transformer facility. The actual power generation is carried out by a satellite in orbit. The power is sent to the ship via microwaves, transformed into a laser, and then transferred to Olympia Dome.”

“If the satellite providing the power is stopped, won’t it lose the foundation it needs to produce the high-output laser?”

“The Ocean Substation has control of the satellite.”

"How? It's constantly receiving a ton of microwaves, right? It seems to me that would overpower any control signals sent back."

"There are three ships total. They aren't all receiving microwaves at all times. Two carry out the transformation and the remaining one controls the satellite. By swapping out which ones undergo the burden and which one gets to rest, they can perform maintenance without any downtime."

The bodyguard lightly shook his head and said, "But Athletica needs the Ocean Substation's laser. That means they have to receive the microwaves. If they can't do that and control the satellite, it might be possible to stop the satellite with a signal from one of the other ships."

"Yes, but only if the signal isn't being jammed. The power generation satellite will continue to send the microwaves like normal unless it receives a stop signal. It can continue just fine without any control signals for a while."

"Dammit," cursed the bodyguard.

While operating the handheld device, Mariydi said to him, "So what do you think we should do?"

"What do you mean? There's nothing we can do," he muttered. "We may have firearms and the authority to take military action, but that's only if your life is in danger. Olympia Dome is the target this time, not you. Unfortunately, we cannot use our guns."

"If that ship is hijacked, this giant artificial island will ultimately sink into the Atlantic!! That will kill me. That seems like reason enough for you to act as my bodyguard!"

"If I fire without authority to do so, it's a crime!!" shouted the bodyguard as if to cover up her words. "Everyone who attacked you were professional spies who took all the necessary preparations to slip through the gaps of an investigation before they attacked. We don't have that kind of protection, so we will definitely get arrested. And this isn't a part of the Capitalist Corporations. I don't want to be tried in a court that speaks a different language and uses a criminal code I don't understand. There's no way I could win!!"

"…"

"And the same goes for you. Boarding the Ocean Substation to save it would probably have earned you praise in an older era. But nowadays it's nothing but a crime. It could even have you stripped of your medal. If that happened, everyone on your team, the sponsor companies, and maybe even the entire Capitalist Corporations could be after your head. The risk for you makes mine look like nothing!!"

She could be charged for breach of contract.

Simply failing to obtain good results in the event could bring a serious risk to her ability to live a normal life, so if she had her

medal stripped from her due to dishonorable and criminal conduct , the sponsor companies that had expected to earn millions of dollars advertising through her would certainly be furious.

In the Capitalist Corporations where finances were valued higher than human lives, it would not be surprising if they would take revenge with military action.

"Then what do we do?"

"I am going to do my job as your bodyguard. I will do the bare minimum that is required of me."

"…You're saying we should flee?"

"Luckily, you already won the gold medal in the shootathlon. If we just say your health deteriorated due to side effects of doping, you need not attend the closing ceremony. We can get you on a charter plane right away that should be able to escape before Olympia Dome is destroyed."

"It's being destroyed as we speak!!"

"We can't get on that charter plane without you!!" snapped back the bodyguard.

Lucas Westernrose of Catwalk TV looked shocked, but he finally turned his smartphone's lens towards the two and spoke.

"Hello? Yes, yes, well, the most our crew can call in is a helicopter. Yes, given the location of Olympia Dome, it cannot continue flying for the distance required to reach land, yes. Also,

yes, as a member of the Information Alliance, yes, I cannot allow myself to turn tail and run in the face of this kind of 'truth', yes."

He had made up his mind to stay using his own form of logic.

Mariydi, the only one with a ticket allowing her to escape, somehow actually felt left behind.

She had no idea what to say, so the bodyguard said, "I'm telling you to get on despite that. If you have any chance at all, you need to survive this. You earned that medal with your own skill. No one will blame you if you live your life a bit pridefully for a while."

"…What will all of you do?"

"Find some way to contact Olympia Dome's management. I hope we can find a loophole that allows us to use our weapons. It doesn't matter how much we have to split hairs, as long as we are allowed to fight, we can head to the Ocean Substation. It's better than doing nothing." The bodyguard seemed to be checking over all of the conditions. "And then…right. If we can contact Miss Alicia, we can check on the sponsor's opinion. If a large company can expedite Olympia Dome giving us permission to fight, that would be a huge help…but there will probably be a lot of barriers in the way given the average condition at the Technopics."

Also, he had no way of knowing if they could even defeat Athletica in a straight shootout.

And their actions could get in the way of some political and legal issues.

The bodyguard had to know that there was no way he would make it in time after jumping through all those hoops.

And there was Alicia, who was so earnest when it came to finances and contracts.

And Stacy, who secretly enjoyed gathering famous autographs.

Whether they could fight or not, everyone who happened to be on Olympia Dome would soon be killed.

They would be utterly blown away by the tremendous firepower of those giant weapons known as Objects.

With the one exception of Mariydi, who could fight but had the privilege of being able to flee.

"…"

"C'mon," urged the bodyguard as he led her to a nearby vehicle .

Once they were behind the vehicle where the other surrounding soldiers could not see them, Mariydi stuck a military knife against the bodyguard's side.

"Give me your gun and the key to the vehicle."

"Dammit, not again!! When did you steal my knife!?"

Lucas Westernrose aimed his smartphone's lens in their direction, but Mariydi ignored him and continued her demands.

"Just hand them over. Your method won't make it in time. I'm sure you know that. So hurry up and hand over your gun and the key."

"You really might have your medal stripped from you."

"This is the only way."

"The sponsor companies might continue hunting you for decades! Are you really okay with that!?"

"If it comes to that, I can just win another medal to make up for it."

Mariydi moved the tip of the knife slightly and the bodyguard winced. While putting up with the pain, he handed Mariydi his handgun and the key to the vehicle.

Mariydi opened the vehicle's driver side door and Lucas Westernrose shouted after her.

"Hello!? If I would be in the way, yes, yes, at least take this smartphone with you! Yes, yes, you will likely be the closest to the truth!!"

"Sorry, but the amount of blood will probably force the rating too high."

After Mariydi's blunt refusal, the bodyguard spoke up.

"I'm not going with you."

"I'm not going to tip you and I can't guarantee your safety. I'm not brazen enough to ask you to come with me despite that."

"…I'll have to take a bit of a detour, but I will catch up with you . So head on to the Ocean Substation ahead of me. Got it?"

Mariydi gave a slight nod and then stuck the key in the ignition.

Part 2

The Ocean Substation was stopped a few kilometers out at sea.

Mariydi was headed for a harbor facility. Unlike the swimming area, this area of the ocean had no artificial bottom prepared. It had a depth of several thousand meters immediately off the coast.

Mariydi climbed out of the parked vehicle while checking the data she had downloaded from Athletica onto the handheld device .

She heard the bodyguard's voice coming from the piezoelectric receiver in her ear.

(Did he find a usable frequency? Who knows how long it will remain usable, but this might be thanks to allying ourselves with a TV station even if it is just a net one.)

"How exactly do you plan to board the Ocean Substation? Are you going to borrow a motorboat?"

"The attackers from Athletica are currently boarding it by helicopter and hovercraft. And the crew is firing assault rifles from the deck in order to stop them. If I used a boat, I would just end up right in the middle of the firefight."

A good number of relatively small cruisers were moored there. They were not used to travel between Olympia Dome and land. The cruisers were used to hold the equipment for the divers that worked underneath Olympia Dome and to function as relay and rest points for those divers.

An old security guard was stationed at the entrance to the facility, but Mariydi grabbed his wrist, twisted his arm, and threw him down to the asphalt.

She swiped the unconscious guard's card key and entered the building that had been made from a modified container.

"The Ocean Substation is a transformer facility, but they still need power to carry out that work." Mariydi ignored the diving wetsuit and grabbed an oxygen tank. "The microwaves are not used for the ship's own power. Methane hydrate is gathered from the ocean floor which is burned by gas turbines to create electricity . That means it must have a gate for the small mining submarines to pass through."

"You're going to go in from the bottom!?"

"If those small submarines are still going in and out, this is the safest method. I won't have to head straight into a firefight."

With the oxygen tank on her back, Mariydi grabbed an aqua scooter. The device was something like a kickboard with a motor attached. It would allow her to travel through the ocean at much faster speeds than with flippers.

(This is the center of the Atlantic Ocean. This far out, the water is usually a few thousand meters deep.)

If she ran into some kind of equipment trouble, she was done for.

Mariydi felt a different kind of chill running down her back than the prospect of a firefight gave her, but she could not stop here.

Mariydi held the aqua scooter under one arm and left the container-shaped building. When she reached the edge of the water where the cruisers were moored, she jumped straight into the water.

The Ocean Substation was a good distance away.

As Mariydi moved through the ocean water using the aqua scooter, she heard Alicia's voice in her ear.

"I heard what you are doing."

"It's too late to make any complaints now. If you want to stop me, come after me with a gun."

"I am not the one complaining. I merely relay the sponsor's valuable opinion to you."

Alicia had to know that she would also be killed if Olympia Dome was destroyed, so it may have been quite impressive that she managed to keep her usual attitude.

"So what did the sponsor say? Will they hunt me down for revenge if the medal is stripped from me? Or will they send me off as slave labor?"

"The possibility of being stripped of the medal is indeed worrying. The publicity for the rifle would effectively fall from heaven to earth. It would fall below zero even. But," added Alicia. "Even if you are stripped of your medal, the publicity could reach an even higher position than before if we are able to reconstruct this into a moving tale of how you fought to protect the innocent. That is their opinion."

"…I see."

That may have been Alicia's way of being considerate.

The woman spoke nothing of how much effort had been expended beneath the surface to reach that compromise with the large companies that were like incarnations of economic activity.

"And so, if you are going to take action, then make sure you are successful. The worst case scenario would be having your medal stripped from you and yet being unable to protect Olympia Dome. If that happens, you have no room for excuses."

"Understood. Give me something good to eat once I get back alive."

"I will join you in that as long as it comes out of your expenses."

During their conversation, Mariydi had arrived nearby the Ocean Substation.

She looked around the clear area of ocean through her goggles and spotted what looked like a 3 meter long probe ship moving down below the bottom of the giant ship.

As the diagram on the handheld device had said, a portion of the Ocean Substation's bottom could open and close to allow the small submarines in and out.

If she clung to one of those submarines, she could sneak into the giant ship.

In all likelihood, a firefight was already underway inside.

The real challenge began here.

Part 3

Mariydi snuck into the Ocean Substation by clinging to the side of one of the small submarines.

The block she found herself in seemed to be where the methane hydrate acquired from the ocean bottom was converted into combustible gas. Around 20 men wearing work uniforms were inside. They all stiffened in shock when they saw the intruder, but they breathed a sigh of relief when she removed her goggles and they realized she was Mariydi Whitewitch the athlete.

(I didn't expect to be able to use my face like a business card. I guess winning that medal wasn't all bad.)

"You know this Ocean Substation is under attack, right? Who is in charge here?"

"I-I am," replied a female worker in her thirties.

Mariydi looked over at a steel piece of equipment larger than the thick pipes and garages scattered around the area.

"What is this equipment for? What exactly does it all do?"

"It completely melts the solid methane hydrate to convert it into the gas fuel to use in the gas turbines. The neighboring block contains the power generating turbines."

"How does one access the turbines?"

"They are through a single door. You do not need to head out into the passageway."

"The Ocean Substation is a large scale transformer facility, but it needs its own power to run. That is acquired here. In other words, the entire Ocean Substation would stop running if this block could no longer be used. Is that correct?"

"Y-yes. But…are you saying the attackers are targeting this block to rob the unmanned weapons protecting Olympia Dome of their power?"

"No. They plan to weaponize the power transfer laser. I doubt we can stop them from taking over the ship, so I want to make sure they cannot use the transformation facility before they take over." Mariydi counted the small submarines. "So I have a request for you workers. I want you to remove the parts needed to run the turbines. Including the spares. Get on the small submarines with those necessary parts and escape. If you do that, they will not be able to use the weaponized laser even if they hijack the Ocean Substation."

"The necessary parts are pretty heavy. We would have to use a crane… And there are 4 spares, so it would take 30 minutes to complete the work."

"I'll buy that time for you," said Mariydi as she pulled out a handgun.

When Mariydi started for the door leading to the passageway, the female worker frantically called out to her.

"Wait! What will you do?"

"It seems the crew is trying to protect the ship with their lives, but they need not do that once the necessary turbine parts have been removed. I need to explain the situation to them so they can escape rather than die needlessly. And while I'm at it, I can draw the enemy's attention to buy more time until they manage to take over."

"With a single handgun? You have to be joking."

"Like I said, I don't think I can win. When the time is right, I'll escape too. I'm not some hero of justice. If you don't want to die, then get to work right away. You are the only ones who can protect your own lives." Mariydi pressed up against the wall right next to the door. "Once I leave, use the crane to place something heavy in front of this door. I will not be coming back here. Ignore any knocking. Don't be fooled by any cries or entreaties. They will all be traps. Don't let anyone in. Got it?"

The workers gave small nods to show they did, so Mariydi opened the steel door slightly. The passageway was empty. She slipped out and closed the door behind her.

(Dammit. How many enemies are there in here?)

Unlike a luxurious passenger ship designed with livability in mind, the passageways were narrow, winding, and filled with exposed pipes. The corners of the passageways could be used for cover, but there was almost nothing to hide behind in the straight areas. Simply put, the way it was constructed was bad for Mariydi's heart.

She had no specific objective.

She had no conditions for victory.

She simply had to gather as many people as possible and retreat quickly. This was a battle to minimize the damage in a battle that they were already losing.

But she would still get back at them.

By making sure the Ocean Substation was unusable before fleeing, she could crush Athletica's plan.

Part 4

Ramil Scofflaw used hand signals to give instructions to her subordinates.

They fired a recoilless rifle which blew away the crew's cover. She and her subordinates then quickly began moving once more.

"The satellite control facility has been taken."

"The bridge has been taken."

"The microwave reception control facility has been taken."

As she listened to the reports from other units coming in over a special radio frequency band, Ramil fired a carbine at the resisting

crew. She purposefully fired a bit away from them and her subordinates actually shot them once they determined the crew would counterattack.

"That just leaves the laser transfer control facility and the engine room at the bottom of the ship."

Despite using unmanned weapons for their primary force, Olympia Dome had a surprising amount of flesh-and-blood fighters on the Ocean Substation itself.

But…

"It looks like most of them are workers for maintenance and the like, so they haven't undergone any specialized training."

"Then this shouldn't be a problem," said one of Ramil's subordinate soldiers with a recoilless rifle hanging from his shoulder.

But Ramil did not smile.

"This means we must eliminate everyone onboard including the noncombat crewmembers. And we will have to perform a search of every nook and cranny of the ship to do so. That will be quite a pain."

"We can carry out the search once the main facilities have fallen. Lieutenant Colonel, you and the others construct a barricade around the main block and carry out the work to weaponize the laser as planned."

"I would rather not have to fear an attack from some hidden enemy. Be thorough."

Just as Ramil gave that order, she heard a short burst of rifle fire and the subordinate she had been talking to was mowed down.

Ramil frantically hid behind a corner in the passageway, but she looked puzzled.

(That sounded like one of our weapons. Did someone steal one of our rifles?)

She was in what was commonly referred to as a crank-shaped passageway.

The shape was easy to recognize when drawn on paper. It headed straight, turned ninety degrees to the right, and then turned 90 degrees to the left at the next corner. What mattered was that it had two corners that were not too far apart.

The two sides of the firefight were each using one of the corners as cover and the passageway between had been turned into a pathway of death with bullets flying every which way.

Neither side could land a decisive blow while firing from the corner.

How would they pass that pathway of death?

The side that accomplished it would be the victor.

Ramil reached a fiberscope lens that was similar to an endoscope around the corner, but it was destroyed by a rifle bullet before she could get a good look at the passageway.

(Dammit. They must have the better ability to view the passageway.)

This was not a situation where she could carelessly stick her head around the corner.

She used the directional microphone on her carbine to pick up the enemy's voice. She could hear a girl speaking from the other side of the crank shape.

"You do not need to defend the ship with your life. Let them have the Ocean Substation. As long as they are unable to weaponize the laser, their plan can continue no further."

"But…"

"No matter how many microwaves are sent pouring down on the ship, the transformer work requires another power source. They can do nothing if they cannot use that. There are three Ocean Substations. Even if one of them is made unusable and destroyed from the outside, Olympia Dome can continue functioning. All of you need to leave as quickly as possible. Do you understand?"

(Not good!!)

Ramil distinctly felt a bad feeling run down her spine. She frantically grabbed her radio and gave orders to her subordinates.

"Alpha! Charlie! Change your current route and head to the engine room! That is your top priority!! Do not let them destroy the equipment related to the methane hydrate!!"

(Shit. Who is this? She didn't just happen to be here during the attack. The way she spoke, she obviously knows what our plan is!!)

Ramil used hand signals to give attack instructions to her remaining subordinates.

She did not know who that girl was, but she knew her mere presence would negatively affect their plan.

As a true member of the Faith Organization, Ramil was spurred to action by something other than logic. With her instinct giving an extra push beyond her inspiration, Ramil immediately began the attack once more.

Her subordinates stuck only their arms out around the corner and fired their low-recoil handguns again and again. Meanwhile, Ramil poked her head around the corner and took accurate observations of the length and width of the passageway, the material of the walls, and other things.

"Wah!!"

She heard the girl's voice from the other end of the passageway. It was accompanied by the squeaking of shoes against the floor.

(Is she falling back?)

As soon as that question entered Ramil's mind, one of her subordinates creating the diversion stepped out to pursue the girl.

But Ramil grabbed his shoulder to stop him.

"Shooting and falling back was the strategy used in the counterattack while creating the Blank, wasn't it?" she muttered while calmly firing a 50mm grenade.

She did not fire it straight down the passageway so that it would hit the back wall.

The enemy was around the ninety degree corner in the passageway, so Ramil fired the grenade against the side wall.

The explosive bounced off the wall and landed around the corner.

Part 5

Mariydi noticed the grenade right away.

"Shit!?"

She pushed down the crewmember she was using to tell the rest of the crew to escape, and frantically got down on the ground herself.

An explosion rang out.

It had an effective radius of 10 meters. However, the grenade was designed to scatter tons of sharp fragments diagonally up from the floor to extend that range slightly. In other words, the destruction did not spread in a pure circle; it was more of a cone shape.

If you lay down on the ground while near the grenade, you could still escape that cone.

(Good thing it wasn't the type that scatters the shrapnel from the air.)

Mariydi spoke to the male crewmember.

"Are you alive!?"

"Alive enough to respond. But…shit! I can hear footsteps approaching!!"

It was unlikely the enemy thought they had finished things with that single grenade. They had merely used it to create the time they needed to cut through the "pathway of death" in the center of the crank-shaped passageway.

Mariydi and the crewmember could not regain the position they needed for a proper firefight.

The enemy would not challenge them to a quick draw like Western gunmen.

"This way! Hurry!!"

Mariydi dragged the crewmember to his feet and headed down the passageway.

Part 6

Ramil and the others cut down the "pathway of death" all at once. Beyond the next corner was a straight passageway. It had no cover. Ramil's carbine would be enough to finish off the enemy.

But just before she turned the corner, an explosive noise rang out.

She peered around the corner and saw nothing but dust floating in the air.

Ramil pulled her head back behind cover and one of her subordinates spoke up.

"She has explosives too?"

"We know she stole one of our firearms. We need to assume she has everything we carry. She probably used a recoilless rifle fuse and attached the explosive to the wall."

No counterattack came.

The enemy was either focused on fleeing or had been injured.

Ramil came to a quick decision and gave instructions with hand signals. They ran down the passageway and to a large hole that had been opened in the wall. Due to the dust in the air from the

explosion, they could not see inside. Ramil fired a grenade through the hole. That would both see if anyone was hiding inside and blow away the dust.

But…

The hard sound of the grenade landing came from much closer than she had expected. The combustible gas should have launched it a good distance, but it landed only 3 meters away. That was when she and her subordinates realized something. Hidden by the dust, a pushcart had been left right in front of them.

The grenade had struck the handle and fallen to the ground.

And this left Ramil and the others well within its range.

"Shit!!"

They frantically moved to evade the blast.

An explosive noise rang out shortly thereafter.

Part 7

Using the explosion as her sign, Mariydi began a counterattack with the carbine she held in both hands.

With intermittent short bursts, she quickly silenced the Athletica soldiers who had been injured by the grenade. Even if they were injured, they could still function as enemy soldiers as long as they had the strength left to raise their arms and pull the

trigger and the will left to fight. Mariydi was relentless when it came to neutralizing them.

"Tch!!"

She heard someone click their tongue and then saw a figure fleeing.

Mariydi was conflicted over whether she should pursue the figure or not.

(…Huh. The other people around that person are creating an oddly thick barrage to let that person escape.)

She came to a quick decision using that information.

(That person must be important. If I defeat them, I can bring confusion to the Faith Organization ranks!!)

As stated previously, Mariydi was working under the assumption that she would lose this battle. But since she knew she could not stop the Ocean Substation from being taken over, she had set her goal to saving as many of the crewmembers as possible and preventing the giant transformer facility from functioning in order to stop the laser power transfer facility from being weaponized.

In other words, she was not at the final goal for the incident as a whole.

The fighting would likely continue.

And so she wanted to cause damage to the structure of the Faith Organization group for the sake of the next battle.

(Dammit. Can I still make it after that person!?)

If she simply chased after the fleeing figure, the barrage meant to hold her in place would probably take her out. Mariydi called up the diagram of the Ocean Substation on her handheld device and looked for an alternate route to where she guessed the fleeing figure was headed.

She needed to hurry, but she could not let her guard down.

Mariydi waited for the figure at the corner of a cross-shaped intersection between two passageways.

She heard someone speaking from around the corner. It seemed to be a radio transmission.

"It's not good. The methane hydrate facility is deserted! And a few of the parts needed for the turbines that power the transformer work have been removed. What should we do, lieutenant colonel!? "

"Now they've done it!! Connect me to Warrant Officer Iris Aggravation!!"

Mariydi focused on regulating her breathing and adjusted her grip on the carbine's grip.

She could hear footsteps approaching.

"Warrant Officer? Have you heard what happened?"

"Lieutenant colonel, please escape from there as quickly as possible. We will do the work here. I am sure we will need your planning abilities in the future, so hurry!"

"Sorry about this. I'm counting on you."

Mariydi moved half her body out from the corner and aimed her carbine.

She fired without hesitation.

"!?"

A string of gunshots rang out. But it seemed the figure had noticed just before she fired. The figure had leaped into a different passageway and escaped harm.

Mariydi frantically resumed pursuit.

But just as she was about to head down the passageway the figure had disappeared down, she frantically moved back.

She then poked her head around the corner to check.

A recoilless rifle shell lay carelessly in the middle of the passageway. From this distance, Mariydi could not tell if it had any kind of radio-controlled fuse or an infrared sensor attached. But since either was possible, she needed to act as if it could detonate at any time.

(Shit. I don't have time to be held up at every turn like this.)

Just as she reached for the sensor switch on her carbine, a few short burst of bullets came from further down the passageway. Mariydi cowered back a bit. The shell was meant to hold her back. If she tried to neutralize the fuse, a stream of bullets waited for her. That was the situation the enemy had constructed that prevented her from dealing with the shell.

Mariydi gave up and took a detour through a different passageway.

She knew where this enemy was headed.

No important facilities lay in the direction in which the figure had been headed. The only thing in that direction was an exit leading to the deck. Mariydi opened a different door than the one used by the figure and headed outside.

The deck was large and flat.

It contained four giant parabolic antennae and the complex arrangement of pillars that supported them. It was like a forest made of metal. It had countless areas to use as cover.

Mariydi headed directly below one of the bowl-shaped antennae while aiming her carbine every which way.

(Where is she?)

Mariydi moved from steel pillar to steel pillar and looked all around.

(She fled with the help of her subordinates. What is she going to use to escape? A hovercraft? A helicopter?)

It turned out to be neither.

A giant mass of metal sat in an open area free of the parabolic antennae and pillars.

It was a Legitimacy Kingdom S/G-31 fighter with VTOL ability.

More accurately, it was a Faith Organization Harpuiai fighter with the exterior altered to look like that.

Instead of a specialized ladder, the figure was using a wire to climb up onto the nose of the fighter. She was just about to climb into the cockpit.

"Shit!!"

Mariydi frantically moved to fire her carbine, but enemy fire came in from the side. Sparks flew from a nearby steel pillar and Mariydi frantically leapt behind the pillar. Meanwhile, the jet engine of the fighter the figure had boarded began to rumble and it slowly began rising vertically into the air.

The situation had been reversed.

If the fighter used its missiles or machine gun, Mariydi would be helpless to defend against it. The carbine's rifle bullets were not enough to pierce the fighter's armor.

(Not good…)

Mariydi scattered rifle bullets in the direction of the enemy soldiers firing at her to hold them in check and then she dashed below one of the parabolic antennae.

If the fighter wanted to, it could easily blow away the antenna.

However, the enemy would not want to destroy one of the parabolic antennae that received the microwaves.

Mariydi could survive.

She was not trying to go down with the ship.

Luckily, the necessary parts for the turbines needed to generate power for the transformer work had already been removed. The enemy could no longer use the weaponized laser even if the Ocean Substation surrendered to them. And so Mariydi felt it was wiser to safely retreat, prepare some large scale firepower, and then blow up the entire Ocean Substation with most of the Athletica force inside.

But then…

"Mariydi. Mariydi Whitewitch!! Get out of there now!!" A transmission of her bodyguard's voice resounded in her ear. "The Ocean Substation's weaponized laser is active. If you stay there, you will be in the center of their sights!!"

"What are you talking about?" asked Mariydi in confusion from atop the deck.

The turbines used for the transformer work were unusable. She saw no way the enemy could use the weaponized laser even if they took over the Ocean Substation. Also, Mariydi was directly below one of the parabolic antennae that received microwaves. Even if they could fire the weaponized laser freely, she doubted they would target that location.

But the situation had developed much further than she had thought.

She had overlooked one thing.

The Ocean Substations supporting Olympia Dome's unmanned weapons numbered three in total.

It was possible the enemy had attacked more than one of them at a time.

And…

A different Ocean Substation could be targeting the ship Mariydi was onboard.

When she saw the giant ship cruising on the horizon, Mariydi finally realized what was going on.

"Shit…"

She did not have time to think of a way to escape. She fired the carbine to hold back the remaining enemy soldiers on deck and ran toward the ship's handrail.

"Shit!!"

That figure had spoken with someone named Warrant Officer Iris over the radio. When she thought back, she realized it was possible that conversation was not being held with someone aboard the same ship.

She somehow managed to leap over the handrail.

But the massive strike came before she reached the ocean surface a few dozen meters below.

A tremendous flash of pure white light roasted Mariydi's retinas. The Ocean Substation's 500-meter-long form was blown away from the very center. The steel ship glowed orange and melted like a sugar sculpture. The incandescent metal struck the ocean water, causing a noise similar to that produced by Chinese cooking to reverberate throughout the area.

Mariydi had no idea what position she was in when she hit the water.

She struck the water's surface and was tossed about by a horrible maelstrom of water that normal waves could never create. It was an unnatural water current created by the remnants of the giant destroyed ship sinking.

"Cough!! Cough!! Cough cough!!"

Mariydi somehow managed to get her head above water and searched for something to grab ahold of while coughing. She

found a thin panel that was likely a remnant of something used in one of the ship's interior walls. She clung to it for buoyancy.

"…They're insane."

The giant structure was standing up vertically, making it almost look like the Tower of Babel. It slowly sank down to the bottom of the ocean. That single blast had done that to a mass of steel as large as an island.

An explosive noise shot by overhead.

It was the Faith Organization Harpuiai fighter that had taken off via VTOL just before the laser had struck. It was no longer fleeing. The fighter was leisurely returning with the majesty of a victor.

It was returning to its new home base.

It was returning to the Ocean Substation equipped with that weaponized laser.

Enemy Forces 4

After Lieutenant Colonel Ramil Scofflaw landed the Harpuiai fighter on the deck, she used the movable ladder to climb down from the fighter.

Warrant Officer Iris Aggravation came out to meet her.

"Welcome."

"So we only managed to get this one in the end."

Originally, they had intended to take all three ships. They had planned to gain control of every single one of the Ocean Substations that doubled as control centers for the power generation satellite. They would then have used the three freely usable weaponized lasers to pull the trigger of war.

"Ocean Substation I was just destroyed by the weaponized laser . We failed to take Ocean Substation III, but the antenna facility used to control the power generation satellite was destroyed and the parabolic antennae used to receive the microwaves were smashed. Only this ship is still functional. We are the only ones that can freely control this massive amount of power. No one can stop us."

"Couldn't you have waited to fire on the other ship?"

"Unfortunately, a Capitalist Corporations PMC was waiting for an opportunity to board Ocean Substation I. Its satellite control center was still functioning, so we had to prevent them from taking control."

"Understood."

Ramil gave a small amount of thought to the soldiers that had still been aboard when the weaponized laser had struck, but she soon changed her train of thought. The plan could continue, so their deaths had built the foundation for their success.

"How is Olympia Dome's management reacting?"

"We are monitoring their transmissions, but they have not done much of anything. They seem to be focusing less on dealing directly with us and focusing more on regulating information so the spectators do not panic and begin rioting. …They must have a groundless belief that the Objects can settle this if need be."

And that was perfect for Athletica.

It was like placing a cooked turkey in front of a starving lost child.

"And what are the Objects doing?"

"Their information network is more secure which makes their transmissions harder to intercept. But from what we can tell by observing them from a distance, they are showing no signs of movement. They must be having trouble deciding whether this will end as a small conflict or if it will develop into a full-blown war. Countless international disputes both large and small are constantly occurring here in Olympia Dome after all."

It would help if they would hurry up and make their move, but there was something Ramil had to check on first.

"How was the output of the weaponized laser?"

"The modifications went as planned. However, the output was weaker than expected. It is right on the line between being a threat to an Object or not."

"Do you know what the issue is?"

"We worked it out with the data from the previous test firing." Iris operated the small computer she was carrying. "When transferring power, the laser is set to supply an even and stable power supply. The program detects the powerful laser as an error and attempts to 'smooth out' the values. It is a software issue. There is no need to physically modify the equipment."

"How long will this take to fix?"

"I am working on it as we speak. I should have it done in another hour."

"Good." Ramil looked around and spoke to the surviving soldiers. "Olympia Dome cannot use its unmanned weapons. But it is still possible their flesh-and-blood forces and PMCs from other world powers could attempt to interfere. We must stop them at all costs. This one shot is what matters. Whether we can get this shot off or not will greatly alter the history of the world. Do you understand?"

No one raised any objections.

Without rest, they all headed back to their posts.

A maintenance soldier set up an anti-air weapon in place of the defense system that had been destroyed in the attack. An infantryman checked on an autocannon bolted to the deck. The fighter pilots headed for their beloved fighters.

Ramil looked over at her Harpuiai fighter.

She was the Faith Organization's Rocket Icarus.

Just like Mariydi aka Ice Girl 1, she excelled in the special field of the ace pilot.

She announced, "Let's finish this."

Chapter 5

Part 1

Mariydi Whitewitch dried her wet hair with a towel.

She was aboard a small motorboat the Capitalist Corporations bodyguard PMC had sent for her.

"So the Ocean Substation was hijacked."

"Yes, but I wonder why they are waiting to finish this using the weaponized laser," said her bodyguard.

Mariydi had no definite answer, but she had a guess.

"If that laser blast had the destructive power of an Object's main cannon, I would not have survived being that nearby. Only blackened ash would remain for you to recover."

"So its output was too low?"

"I doubt they've given up, though. They've come this far, so they will work to finish this no matter what it takes. They are probably working to modify the Ocean Substation's main equipment."

"That isn't good. We have no way of knowing how much time we have."

"I'd say we're lucky they can't fire it now."

The motorboat arrived at Olympia Dome's shore. There should not have been any work for anyone but the other PMC members working under the bodyguard, but for some reason Alicia and Stacy were waiting there too.

Mariydi stepped out of the motorboat and asked, "What cards do we have left?"

"The Capitalist Corporations Object at sea is requesting an explanation for all this confusion. It seems those at its maintenance base have begun gathering information on their own."

"Tell them that everyone is done for if it moves."

"But will the different Objects from the different world powers really be fooled so easily if the Ocean Substation fires that weaponized laser? They have so many sensors and radars equipped."

"The Objects from the four world powers intentionally create a stalemate situation, but none of them actually want that. The odds are good that at least one of them wants to go on a rampage badly enough to use this as an opportunity. Even if no Object actually does anything initially, as long as there are rumors spreading that one has, the situation could explode. When it comes to the Objects, we need to assume the situation is incredibly delicate. …Dammit. Do we really have no cards left to play?"

If Olympia Dome ended up being drawn into a battle and the thousands of Technopic athletes were killed, people all around the world would explode with anger. An increase in large scale

terrorist attacks and rioting would destroy the distinction between safe countries and battlefields. And that could easily destroy the system of monetary circulation that functioned as the gears of a stable society.

Stacy tilted her head to the side like an elementary school student.

"Can't you just sneak in like before?"

"The difficulty level of getting aboard a completely controlled ship with a renewed defense system is simply too much greater than getting aboard a ship in the middle of a confused firefight. Who knows how many hundreds of soldiers are aboard that ship. Getting aboard would mean every single gun barrel would be pointed at us."

"Blowing it away from outside would be fastest," said the bodyguard quickly. "The electric power itself is supplied by the generator satellite via microwaves. If we could only destroy those huge parabolic antennae…"

"You mean fire a cruise missile at them? But they can use that laser weapon at any time even if it is imperfect at the moment. In all likelihood, they would intercept a missile flying in a straight line. The same goes for mortars that fly in a parabola."

It was possible the laser interception could be overwhelmed with pure numbers, but the bodyguard PMC did not have any cruise missiles to begin with.

They needed some card that could slip past the weaponized laser and fire a large number of shells or missiles.

Without that, they could not stop the Ocean Substation.

If the trigger of a long-drawn out war was pulled with Olympia Dome caught in the middle of those Objects, the thousands of athletes and millions of spectators would be blown away.

Mariydi brought a hand to her chin and thought deeply.

"…Wait, there is something."

"?"

"Where did I see it? There is some card we can use. I know I saw something. But where…?"

As Mariydi muttered those words, she went back through the information in her head, trying to follow that line of thought.

And then her head shot up like it had been struck.

"That's right. Athletica's storehouse!! It was filled with weapons that have nothing to do with the Capitalist Corporations!!"

"My unit already secured the place, but I don't remember hearing that a cruise missile was found there."

"No," said Mariydi while thinking over it. "This is a weapon said to have lost its role when Objects made their appearance, but I don't believe that for a second. No matter how restricted it might

seem, the sky is always stretching out in every direction. Even if they are said to be obsolete, they will always be the stage on which the aces dance through the sky."

"?"

The bodyguard looked confused, but Mariydi pointed at her own chest with her thumb.

"I am a pilot first and foremost. What I want is their Harpuiai fighter."

Part 2

Mariydi and the others arrived at the storehouse they had previously secured.

Lucas Westernrose of Catwalk TV held his smartphone out towards different parts of the storehouse to record it. The item they were looking for was there.

It was a Faith Organization Harpuiai with the exterior altered to look like a Legitimacy Kingdom S/G-31. It was likely one of the weapons prepared to attack the Ocean Substations.

It was already fueled and armed.

Mariydi used the movable ladder to climb up onto the nose and peered into the cockpit.

"The inside controls are a Faith Organization system."

"Can you fly it?" asked the bodyguard as he looked up the ladder towards Mariydi.

Mariydi's small butt made slight restless movements back and forth.

"I flew one around once after stealing it in the Northern European Restricted Zone."

"…Just what kind of conditions do you normally work in?"

She gave no response to that. For Mariydi Whitewitch, bloody fights to the death were the norm.

Mariydi climbed into the cockpit and turned the key to activate the system. She flicked the switch for each meter in turn and made small adjustments by using her index finger to directly touch the various monitors that came to life.

After checking on the flaps and rudder, she put on the goggles that let her use eye movements as a means of control and attached the equipment that supplied her with oxygen. These did not take the standard form of a helmet and mask. A tube that emitted oxygen into the mouth extended from a headset-like part. She attached a small microphone to her throat and set the values so it would emit oxygen according to the movements of her windpipe.

The helmet and mask was much simpler and more effective.

The reason they avoided it was…

(The situation must be similar in the Faith Organization. Technology is no longer developed specifically for the supposedly useless fighters. It only gets some of the defense budget when it doubles as development for Objects.)

The Elites that piloted Objects did not cover their faces with helmets.

As the representatives of their nations, they would fight with their gallant faces exposed. Cameras in the cockpit would film it, and the scenes considered most useful would be edited together to show to the people on a grand scale. It was a simple example of strategic public relations.

"The main wings and tail check out. I will now test the jet engine and radar."

"Wait, let us get away first. I'd rather not get roasted as if by a microwave oven."

The bodyguard frantically gestured to his men to move away.

After making sure they were gone, Mariydi closed the cockpit's clear canopy and ignited the jet engine. With a tremendous roar, the equipment prepared in the storehouse was blown backwards.

With the canopy closed, she could no longer hear any outside voices.

Mariydi used the radio to speak with the bodyguard.

"The output checks out. The three dimensional paddle for the vector thrust nozzle is working normally. The divergence of the thrust for vertical takeoff checks out. Radar output checks out. I'll be going now."

"We'll be playing the role of control. Let us make a bit of extra money, okay?"

"How? Does Olympia Dome rent out airport control towers and radar equipment?"

【harpuiai】
harpuiai

全長…17.1メートル

全高…5.5メートル

全幅…13.1メートル

火器最大装備時重量…25.3トン

最高速度…時速2550キロ（アフターバーナー使用時）

用途…多用途戦闘機

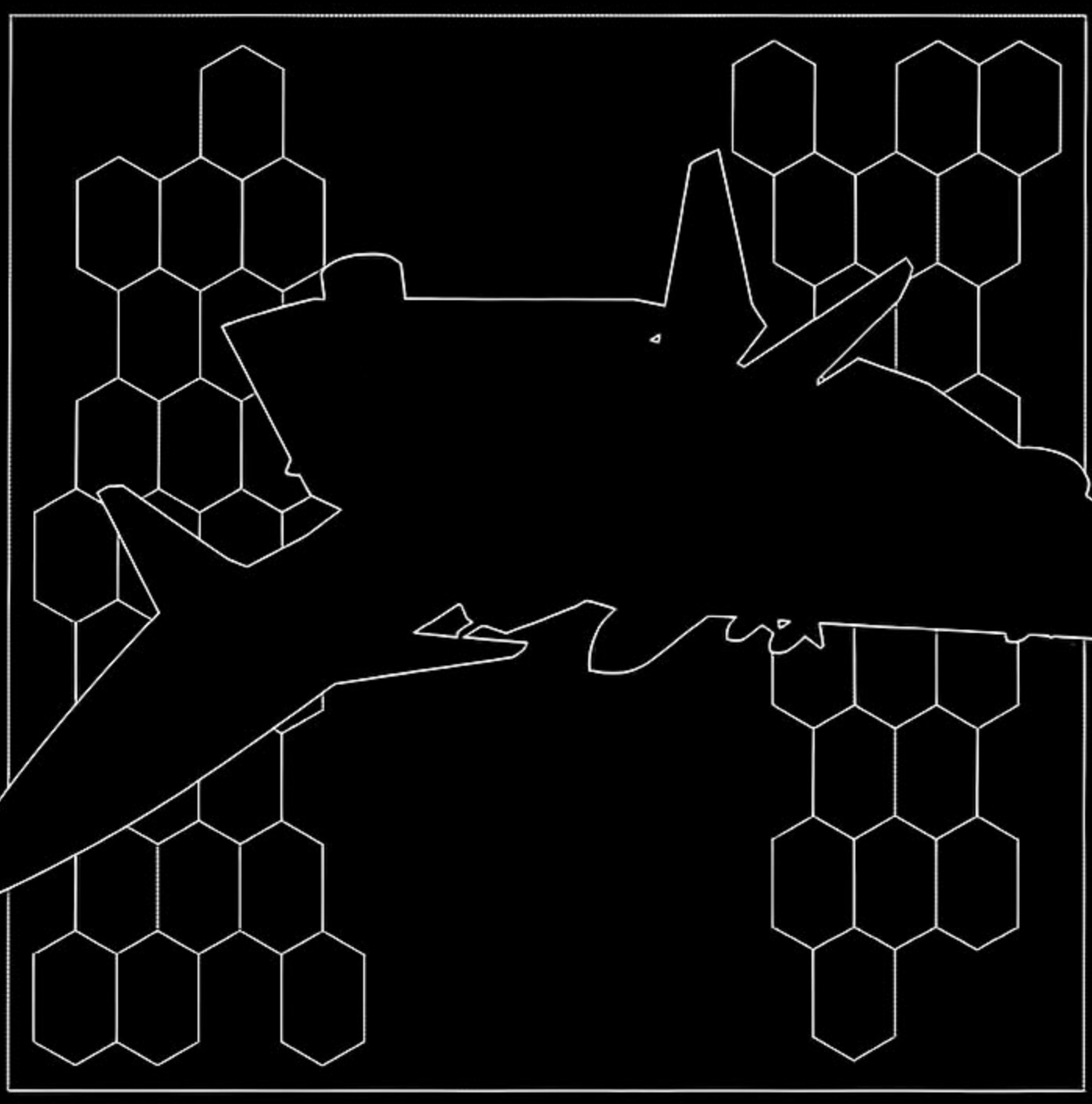
乗員…1名

運用者…『信心組織』（『正統王国』所属と誤認させている）

動力…ギリシア圏営空軍戦力工場製prometheus V×2
（VTOL推力可変モデル）

兵装…短距離空対空ミサイル×12、400キロ爆弾×2、20ミリ機銃×1、
光波長ジャミングポッド×2、電磁波ジャミングポッド×2

メインカラーリング…グレー



harpuiai

"We have a Doppler radar," said the bodyguard to Mariydi's surprise. "We bought a truck equipped with a spherical weather Doppler radar a university was using to examine tornados. We can use it as an early warning device. We originally bought it in the case of a cruise missile attack. We would immediately throw you into a bomb-resistant armored vehicle if it picked up on anything."

"…I don't recall having a bomb-resistant armored vehicle."

"We weren't given permission to use that. As a result, we would have been stuck counting down until impact if a cruise missile had been approaching."

"Pathetic," said Mariydi while holding her head in her hands.

While looking up at her from the ground, the bodyguard gave a bitter smile and said, "But it lets us perform the bare minimum of control duty. We can't do much, but we will do what we can to support you."

"I'll be using Capitalist Corporations air force abbreviated signs , is that okay? Just use my standard call sign, Ice Girl 1. I was the leader of the Ice Squadron, so I was Ice Girl 1."

"Understood. We'll just go by CT to keep it simple, Ice Girl 1."

While listening to the bodyguard's words, Mariydi carefully controlled the jet engine's thrust. A fighter was not like a car. It could not directly rotate its wheels or stop by applying brakes to those wheels. The only options were to move forward with the jet

engine or stop by stopping the jet engine. When a fighter was moved around in an air force base, it would normally be towed by a specialized tractor.

Mariydi moved the fighter out of the storehouse by forcing it forward with thrust from the jet engine. She then diverged the thrust of the jet engine so that it pointed straight down.

The craft shook unsteadily.

No matter how many times she did it, the VTOL was always bad for her heart. Even a slight crosswind could flip the fighter over. Even an experienced ace like Mariydi could not understand what pilots were thinking when they used it to land on aircraft carriers that were rocking in the waves.

After rising about 20 meters, she moved the direction of thrust back to directly behind her. Back in its normal configuration, the Harpuiai tore through the atmosphere at tremendous speed.

Even though the power being sent directly downwards was gone, it felt much more stable like this.

Airplanes truly were only at home when their main wings were slicing through the air.

As she breathed a sigh of relief, a transmission reached Mariydi's ears.

To her surprise it was not from the bodyguard or Alicia. It was from Lucas Westernrose of Catwalk TV.

"Hello? Yes, yes, CT to Ice Girl 1…that's right, isn't it? Yes, yes, my smartphone should be in the cockpit."

"…"

She checked and, sure enough, there it was.

Had he thrown it in while the cockpit canopy was open?

"Yes, yes, the video app should already be active, yes, yes. If you could just point the lens forward and fix it in place, I would be grateful."

"I have no obligation to do that."

"Hello? Well, you can throw it away if you like, yes, yes, but I' m sure you know what would happen if you opened the canopy at that speed."

Mariydi lightly clicked her tongue and carelessly grabbed the smartphone.

But instead of simply following Lucas's instructions, she touched the small screen with her index finger and called up a music player app.

"Hmm." She called up a list of songs and spotted the titles of some hard rock songs. "You're a horrible bastard, but I guess you are a part of the mass media. You do have good taste in music."

With the video app and music player app both active, Mariydi fixed the smartphone in place using tape. It may sound silly, but

that type of item was brought along to perform emergency repairs if a problem with the jacket's anti-G ability was noticed after takeoff.

But the bodyguard and his men acting as the controllers spoke up once that veritable explosion of noise suddenly began.

"CT to Ice Girl 1! What the hell is that!?"

"Boy Racer's End Off. It's a famous song released back when the geniuses of hard rock were still sane. Is it really necessary that I explain this?"

"It's so loud we can't hear you!"

"If you have any complaints, take it up with the journalist who gave me the smartphone."

"Um…Yes, if you have that music playing, yes, yes, it will add an unnecessary expense to broadcasting it, yes…"

"Oh, shut up. This is going to be footage you could never air anyway," replied Mariydi.

Alicia then cut in, "CT to Ice Girl 1. The Ocean Substation is currently 35 kilometers away at sea and is cruising away from Olympia Dome. That is likely both an attempt to restrict any possible counterattack from us and to move into a better position to fire the first shot on the Object."

"That's nowhere to a fighter that can travel at Mach 2."

"They know that. Two crafts are coming from the north, three from north-northeast, and 3 from northeast. They are probably all Harpuiai!!"

"Roger that! Attack Alpha!! Let the battle begin!!"

Attack Alpha was the code for sending out a targeting signal.

"They're going for you, too!! Defense Alpha confirmed!! Be careful! You're going to cross paths in no time at all!!"

Defense Alpha was the code for a targeting signal coming from an enemy.

A few rectangular containers appeared on the goggles that combined the actual scenery with information from the radar. They were still the size of grains of sand when seen with the naked eye, but the electronic eye had already captured the location of the enemy crafts.

The enemy craft directly in front of her was the first to fire an air-to-air missile.

"Defense Charlie!! Cancel it, Ice Girl 1!!"

Defense Charlie was the code for a missile lock and "cancel" simply meant to evade it.

(I didn't detect the targeting signal for long. It didn't take time for aiming in Defense Bravo. This is probably a bluff. It doesn't

actually have a lock! When I panic and make a sudden turn, they'll probably fire their machinegun along my corrected course. Even in the open sky, inertia limits the courses I can take!!)

Mariydi made an immediate decision and continued on forward without evading. The Harpuiai had the ability to supercruise, but she activated the afterburners to bring out the fighter's maximum speed.

Trailing a narrow line of smoke, the air-to-air missile shot past a few meters from the cockpit.

But it did not detonate.

Mariydi adjusted her grip on the control column and lightly stroked a trigger with the bottom of her index finger.

It was the switch for the machinegun.

"AAM has been cancelled!!" reported the bodyguard.

"I already know that! Attack Gun!!"

It turned out to be the Athletica pilot who panicked because he had expected Mariydi to make a sharp turn. And Mariydi had no obligation to wait for him to recover. She fired machinegun bullets at the fighter at a rate of 4000 per minute.

It only took an instant for them to pass each other.

The two masses of composite materials continued on for a bit before turning around for another pass.

However, one of them was trailing a line of black smoke.

"Attack Delta! Active!!" came the report.

Attack Delta referred to a hit and Active meant the enemy could still fight.

"I guess they're good enough to last more than one head-on pass."

"Don't chase the wounded too much, Ice Girl 1. Another one is coming up from behind. When you head after that juicy target, it will get behind you. It's a stereotypical skewer!!"

"Then it's time for a little prank."

Mariydi flipped one of the many switches with her index finger.

Immediately afterwards, a new ID signal used to distinguish friend from foe was displayed on radar.

It was the exact same signal used by the Athletica fighters surrounding Mariydi.

"Wh-what!?"

"We took this fighter from them, remember?" she said. "They can't tell friend from enemy. A close-quarters dogfight needs a bit of confusion."

Not only did the Harpuiai approaching her from behind obviously show it was shaken by this, but all 7 fighters pursuing her did. Hers was the same model of fighter and it was emitting the same signal. It was now impossible for them to distinguish between friend and foe. And from the beginning, Mariydi had simply seen every fighter but her own as an enemy. The signals did not matter to her.

Mariydi rotated the craft while heading forward, flying in a coil shape. This was a special maneuver called a barrel roll that was used to both confuse the enemy fighter coming from behind and to rapidly decelerate her own fighter.

And the intentional deceleration caused the fighter behind her to overtake her.

And of course, in a dogfight between fighters, everything depended on who was behind whom.

"Attack Alpha, Attack Bravo, Attack Charlie," muttered Mariydi as if she was singing a counting song.

While stating the proper attack code-phrases, she fired an air-to-air missile with the thumb on the control column.

After being thrown into confusion by the ID signal and losing sight of its target thanks to the barrel roll, the Athletica Harpuiai was unable to do anything about the attack.

Mariydi then added two new phrases to her song.

"Attack Delta, Strike."

With an explosive noise, orange flames and fragments of composite materials scattered everywhere. Even a fighter flying at supersonic speeds could hear an explosion occurring in front of it even if it sounded distorted. As soon as Mariydi confirmed the explosion, she used the control column to send her fighter into a wide turn. Even so, she could hear a sound like fingernails clawing at the outside of the fighter.

(Some of the fragments hit.)

"CT to Ice Girl 1!! We can't tell where you are like this!!"

"You can use the source of the transmissions I send to you! Use your head. Even the other side will come up with the same idea in just a few minutes!! That's why I need to take out as many of them as I can until then!!"

She had shot down one of the Harpuiai, but it was still 1 against 7.

Since all of the fighters had the exact same ability, it was honestly not a situation she could hope to win in. This went beyond the level of what a pilot's individual skill could make up for. And Mariydi's objective was not to ensure air superiority in the area by shooting down all of the enemies.

"At the very least, I need to lessen the barrage enough to force my way through this! Taking out half of them should be enough. If I can fire a few AAMs at the Ocean Substation, we win!!"

"Ice Girl 1, they have your location. The enemy fighters are heading for you from all four directions! Cancel them! Cancel their Defense Alpha, Ice Girl 1!!"

"A total of 7 coming from four directions. That means one direction has only one fighter. I just have to start there."

Orange lines of machinegun fire erupted from multiple directions at once and Mariydi just barely managed to avoid it. She tilted the control column, made as tight a turn as she could manage, and circled around behind the Harpuiai working on its own.

(And of course, they will have predicted this.)

Mariydi thought while gritting her teeth at the inertial Gs affecting her small body.

(To make up for this weakness, they will try to stick to my tail and skewer me.)

And if she could predict that, she could use it to her advantage.

In other words…

Mariydi suddenly stood her fighter up vertically by 80 degrees.

The massive air resistance this caused made her Harpuiai rapidly decelerate.

This was a special maneuver known as Pugachev's Cobra. The air resistance caused was vastly greater than a normal air brake, so a fighter on the pilot's tail would overshoot them. But practically standing the craft up vertically naturally created a balance issue. The fighter itself had to be very stable, the pilot had to be very accurate on the controls, and most importantly, the pilot needed the endurance to not pass out due to the tremendous Gs of the rapid deceleration.

And Mariydi Whitewitch had all those things.

But there was one thing she did not take into account.

She had competed in the shootathlon three days in a row and taken part in or been the target of various attacks in between.

All that left her with great fatigue.

"…!!!???"

Her vision wavered more than she had expected. She felt as if the stake stabbing into the center of her head to hold her consciousness in place was coming loose. She felt a bizarre floating feeling and it felt like the contents of her stomach had lost their way and were rampaging around within her body.

But she suppressed it all.

She focused on the hard feeling of the control column in her hand and the desire to fight returned all at once.

She once more had control of the fighter.

The five Harpuiai chasing her were all brought before her. Including the one she had been originally chasing, six enemy fighters were now in range for attack.

Mariydi did not hesitate.

In this situation, the machinegun was faster than the air-to-air missiles.

"Attack Gun!!"

Instead of carefully targeting each individual target, she more or less swept her sights along horizontally, scattering bullets as she went. This was the fate of a different version of herself. As the sight of the black smoke, fragments, and orange flames flew towards her retinas, she could not get rid of that parallel feeling.

"Attack Delta!! Strike, Strike, Strike! …Two Active!! You can keep after them!!" reported the bodyguard.

"Don't joke. Getting greedy in the skies will only get you killed. The remaining fighters are still trying to get on my tail. I need to deal with my real objective before they get lucky!!"

She had shot down three fighters and two had survived but had black smoke pouring from their main wings and bodies. Those two could no longer function normally.

Only two of Athletica's fighters could still put up a fight.

To make absolutely sure, she would have liked to damage those two as well, but Ocean Substation's weaponized laser could be fired at any moment. She had no choice but to make a run at it now even if it was risky.

She was confident she could attack the ship while keeping two enemy fighters off her tail.

That confidence was the most deadly enemy for dogfight veterans, but Mariydi needed to force her thoughts in a positive direction to keep her fingertips from trembling.

This was not a peaceful situation where she could allow fear of death to affect her decisions.

(Well, the ship's defense system was probably updated by Athletica. I might have tons of anti-air guns and missiles flying my way.)

Ignoring the other Harpuiai flying through the air, Mariydi made a large movement with the control column. She pointed the nose of her fighter toward the Ocean Substation. She used the

goggles that read her eye movements to set the program such that the parabolic antennae would be tracked and locked on to via visual recognition.

"Attack Bravo."

The most annoying issue with attacking a ship was that the ship was motionless. It may seem that would make it easier to target, but fighters moved so quickly that they would pass by the ship in a blink of an eye. Mariydi was more used to the midair battles with opponents that appeared motionless due to moving at relatively the same speed.

"Attack Charlie!!" she shouted while firing three air-to-air missiles.

She was aiming for the parabolic antennae lined up on the ship's deck rather than at the ship itself. If she was attacking the ship, the standard method would have been to attack the belly of the ship. However, that was usually done with specialized anti-ship missiles. It was difficult to get air-to-air missiles to skim just above the ocean surface. A poor job at aiming would send them stabbing straight into the water. Also, she had no idea how strong the Ocean Substation's armor was. The air-to-air missiles were designed to shoot down fighters that could be taken out by even slight damage. She was not confident the air-to-air missiles could blow a hole in the thick belly of the ship. Since she was flying in a complicated trajectory to keep the enemy fighters off her tail, Mariydi could not use the free fall bombs that required a level flight.

(That would be like aiming for a turtle's shell with a rubber band gun meant to shoot down butterflies. The only logical choice is to shoot out the fluttering wings attached to the turtle's back.)

She was certain her missiles were enough to destroy those parabolic antennae.

And if she managed to destroy the antennae, the ship could no longer receive the microwaves being sent from the generator satellite.

There was no way the 500-meter-long ship could evade the missiles by frantically turning its helm.

But…

Sudden stroboscopic flashes of light came from the three missiles headed for the large ship.

In the next instant, the air-to-air missiles were blown to smithereens.

"Cancel. Cancel. But what was that!?" came the report from CT.

"!!"

Without listening to the bodyguard, Mariydi twisted the control column with all her strength.

She understood exactly what it was she had seen, so she hurriedly dropped her fighter down to just above the ocean surface.

(They intercepted the missiles with the laser!? It can't have been fully weaponized yet, but they must have intentionally lowered the output to fire it in quick succession!!)

Laser light was invisible to the naked eye when viewed from the side. The only reason the high output lasers used on Objects were visible to the naked eye was due to the dust and moisture in the air being roasted.

This laser had not been powerful enough to leave behind such a flashy trail.

But each blast had been enough to shoot down the air-to-air missiles.

Her odds of hitting with non-propelled bombs would be even lower.

And that laser could of course be used to shoot down Mariydi's Harpuiai fighter as well as any missiles or bombs.

"Can you do anything about that!?" asked the bodyguard.

"If I can't, I'll be shot down!!"

Mariydi had lowered her fighter down to just above the ocean surface because the lower altitude had more dust to attenuate and refract the laser. Plus any heat rising from the ground or ocean surface had a chance of creating a mirage. And the odds were not all that low since they were in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean and just below the equator.

Even so, it was no guarantee that she could avoid the laser.

And one other problem presented itself.

(Shit!! The Ocean Substation's wall is coming up fast!!)

The giant ship was 30 meters tall and about 20 meters of that was above water. Mariydi would crash into the belly of the ship if she continued flying just above the ocean surface.

Mariydi adjusted her grip on the control column.

(I'd really rather not have to perform these acrobatics!!)

Mariydi turned the fighter vertical as if stakes had been stabbed into the front and back of the craft which were used to rotate it 90 degrees. With the fighter standing on its side like that, she made a tight turn. The edge of the main wing was only about 50 cm from the surface of the water. This was very precise work that you did not want to be experiencing tremendous Gs while performing.

Mariydi completed her turn after approaching within 10 meters of the Ocean Substation.

She also used her index finger to send machinegun fire flying without really aiming.

Following the direction of the turning nose of the fighter, bullets slammed into the Ocean Substation's belly like perforation.

(No good. And even if I could blow holes into it, no water would get in when it's above water.)

The autocannons and ship-to-air missiles on deck targeted Mariydi, but the close proximity actually helped her. The defense system missed its target and only created pillars of water in the ocean.

(I'm more worried about when I leave. I'll be showing them my tail.)

With the turn complete, she leveled out the fighter, raised her altitude a bit, and zigzagged some in an attempt to escape the sights of the autocannons.

They had autocannons, ship-to-air missiles, and a low output anti-air laser to top it all off.

"They certainly have a lot of options."

"It's also possible the microwaves can be used to mess with your communications and targeting. This isn't going to be easy," said the bodyguard.

But she had to do it.

Mariydi evaded the surviving Harpuiais that were belatedly trying to surround her and began preparations for her next attack.

(That woman on the deck.)

While frowning at the warning buzzer, Mariydi divided her focus by thinking about something else.

(She's a Faith Organization ace pilot. I've seen her picture in their government reports. Is she Ramil Scofflaw aka Rocket Icarus!?)

Part 3

Ramil Scofflaw gritted her teeth as she watched the enemy Harpuiai temporarily leave the Ocean Substation as she stood on the giant ship's deck.

It had approached close enough for her to see the figure within the canopy.

"That was Sky Blue PMC air force's ace pilot, Ice Girl 1! Mariydi Whitewitch is intervening!!"

Ramil was pretty sure that girl had won a medal in the shootathlon. And if that girl who had trained her skills in the Northern European Restricted Zone was behind it, she could understand why the interference had been so skillfully executed.

Ramil turned to the maintenance soldiers who were working on the deck.

"How is the work going!?"

The maintenance soldiers stood at attention, saluted, and replied in turn.

"The movable panels for receiving electricity have been successfully attached to the top of the fighter!!"

"The firing apparatus has been attached to the bottom. The fighter will be good to go as soon as the software has been updated !!"

Ramil approached one of the maintenance soldiers and peered at the small computer he was holding. The work would be done in a few minutes.

"Good. Until the work on the weaponized laser is complete, the microwaves being sent down by the generator satellite are being wasted. Even if we lower the output of the laser to intercept, we cannot block machinegun fire. That Ice Girl 1 is skilled enough to slip in close enough. If that machinegun strike just now had been targeted at the parabolic antennae, we would have been in trouble. The laser alone does not eliminate the threat. In that case, we need another way to use those microwaves."

"Normally, we would be unable to send commands to the satellite thanks to the microwaves, but if we send commands while it is disturbed by solar winds, we can have it generally follow your fighter, lieutenant colonel. It is set up to receive the microwaves, transform them into electric power, and then emit microwaves of its own using an oscillator. Since the power builds up in the craft, the microwaves will be even more powerful than the ones sent from the satellite."

"It just has to be enough to bring down a fighter."

As Ramil grabbed onto the movable ladder, she heard a transmission coming from Iris.

"Lieutenant Colonel, are you really going?"

"Yes."

"We have other pilots. I recommend we hold you in reserve to protect your excellent command abilities."

"We sent out some of those other pilots and most of them were shot down. I have to go. And," added Ramil, "There will be no ' next time'. Everything we have done is concentrated in getting this one shot off now. We must utterly crush these rotten Technopics and bring back the wholesome Olympics. We must bring back that peaceful festival that everyone could grow enthusiastic about but only exists in textbooks and historical archives now. So do not think about some 'next time', Warrant Officer. This is not something that will be given to us if we simply open our arms to receive it. This is our only shot at this."

She did not shout. It was the imposing calmness of her voice that silenced Iris.

Ramil looked up at the modified Harpuiai while still holding onto the movable ladder.

"A microwave armament. …That is what I will use to shoot down that ace."

Part 4

"The Ocean Substation must intercept any air-to-air missiles headed its way. First, fire air-to-air missiles at the parabolic antennae. While they are focused on intercepting them, raise your altitude and fire at the laser firing apparatus with your machineguns. That seems the best plan to me," said the bodyguard .

"It scares me to do that without checking on the limits of its rapid-fire ability, but I suppose that is my only option."

Mariydi made up her mind while further diminishing the number of enemy fighters that were still trying to attack her even while trailing lines of black smoke.

(The Objects are still showing no sign of taking action. I need to take out Athletica before they do.)

If they took action, they would take control of the battlefield in no time at all. That was just what happened with those giant weapons. Nothing gave Mariydi more relief than the fact that the trigger to that destruction had yet to be pulled.

"The impact of that laser can be a bit deceptive, but we still have the overall upper hand," said the bodyguard. "We do not need to sink that ship. All that matters is the parabolic antennae and the firing apparatus. We just have to destroy one or the other of those delicate devices located on the deck. We already have a blade pressed against their throat. You just have to pull that blade to the side!"

"They have a blade to my throat too!!" shouted Mariydi as she turned the fighter's nose back towards the Ocean Substation and raised the output of the jet engine.

Suddenly, a warning buzzer went off in the cockpit. It signified the fighter was being struck by radar waves used for missile targeting.

"Def…ense Alpha. From…southeast. Dist…ance…20…"

"…?"

Mariydi looked puzzled.

Something was wrong with the transmission. No, it was not just the transmission. She noticed some noise starting to run across the radar and it turned into a green sandstorm in no time at all. Finally , even the warning buzzer blaring inside the cockpit cut out. The rectangular containers displaying the locations of the enemy fighters in her goggles disappeared. Only the digital displays showing speed, altitude, direction, and a few other readings were left.

(What? Is this jamming? No. The radar and communications is one thing, but I've never heard of electromagnetic interference that could knock out all of my readings. What is going on!?)

Since she could not use the radar, Mariydi forcibly twisted just her neck around while strapped in so that she could see to the side and back.

And then her expression turned to one of shock.

The surface of the right main wing had begun to glow orange. The thin flap attached to the front was especially bad. The one on the back probably was too. She could not see them with the naked eye, but the glow had her concerned about the state of the air-to-air missiles attached below the main wings.

Mariydi stared blankly at the mysterious phenomenon for a bit, but then…

(Various sudden electromagnetic malfunctions and an unnatural rise in temperature on the right main wing. Don't tell me…)

"Microwaves…? Ice Girl 1 to CT! I am being hit with microwaves from a horizontal direction!! I want confirmation for my guess. Give me some information! Do you see anything odd on your radar!?"

"Ksshh… Ksshhh… Kssssssshhhhh."

"Shit!!"

Mariydi clicked her tongue and moved the control column. She could not guess how powerful the enemy's weapon was. The paint on the wing or the oil on the flaps could set fire and cause further malfunctions. In the worst case, the materials of the fighter could fuse together. Mariydi guessed the enemy was targeting her from the right, so she made a hard turn in an attempt to escape the enemy's microwaves.

But it was no use.

No matter how flashily she flew and even if it would have been enough to avoid a standard machinegun or air-to-air missile attack , some part of Mariydi's Harpuiai continued to glow orange. The spot receiving the attack would change, but she could not evade the attack altogether.

(No, I am evading it. I am!! But the range of the microwaves is greater than I thought. Even if I'm avoiding being shot down by evading a direct hit from the brunt of the attack, the outer edges that spread out like the light of a flashlight are still hitting me!!)

Modern fighters were created to be used against Objects. Whether they could win or not was an entirely different issue.

When the enemy had anti-air lasers, you would be shot down by the first shot once the enemy got a lock.

And so fighters would use various types of jamming to hinder any locks and they would fly at high speed and low altitude so that terrain such as mountains and valleys would reflect the locking radar waves and so that dust and dirt in the air and mirages would keep the laser from hitting.

But there was no way to completely escape the electromagnetic waves themselves.

That was specifically why they used jamming and reflections to make sure they would be safe even when they did.

(If even that first stage of the electromagnetic waves hitting you causes damage, there's nothing you can do! If I keep fighting under the existing laws of the sky, I will be worn down even without a direct hit!!)

The flaps and other parts that were especially susceptible to the heat would be rendered unusable after a certain point. If that happened, the fighter would no longer respond to the movements of the command column. And if the electromagnetic waves caused an error in the fuse of the air-to-air missiles attached below the main wings, they could detonate at any time.

If the accumulating damage caused her evasive actions to slow, more than just the spread out flashlight-like outer edges would hit. If the main brunt of the attack hit the fighter, it would be shot down.

(But I've figured some things out myself.)

Mariydi went over the information in her head while violently moving the command column around.

(Since I'm being hit by the microwaves from so many different directions, it can't be coming from that slow Ocean Substation. Nor is it coming directly from the generator satellite. One of the fighters had a receiver unit attached!!)

It was not one of the fighters she had already seen.

If they had had this trick up their sleeve, they would have used it from the beginning.

It was coming from a fighter that had arrived on the battlefield later.

It was coming from a modified Harpuiai.

(Rocket Icarus. That ace I saw on the deck has arrived!!)

"Kssh…irl 1…"

She must have temporarily escaped the effects of the microwaves because the communications returned.

She heard the bodyguard's voice.

"You are…unable to…deal with this situation…because…you are…thinking about it…in…technical terms. Do not…think about it…in terms of…micro…waves. Think of…a TV…signal. What situation…affects a…TV signal? If you…use that…you can deal with…these…micro…ksshhh…"

(I see.)

She was unable to stop the gradually accumulating damage, but Mariydi frantically tried to think of a way out of her situation.

When did a TV's signal go bad?

When were the electromagnetic waves interfered with?

When terrain such as a mountain or valley reflected the signal.

When manmade structures such as buildings or tunnels reflected the signal.

When a more powerful signal interfered with the signal.

When differences in air temperature refracted the signal.

When impurities in the atmosphere from sandstorms and the like reflected the signal.

A list of answers filled Mariydi's mind, but…

(Where the hell am I supposed to find any of those things in the middle of the ocean!? If only the terrain was more complicated!!)

She was in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean where nothing existed to get in the way. It was a completely open space. There was no better environment for that microwave armament. There was no worse environment for Mariydi who had to evade it.

"Wait," muttered Mariydi. "There is something. There is a piece of terrain I can use to avoid those microwaves!!"

As she put her ideas in order, Mariydi came to a quick decision. She made a large movement with the control column and sent her fighter shooting toward her destination.

Yes.

She was headed for Olympia Dome, that giant manmade island floating in the Atlantic Ocean.

Part 5

While Ramil Scofflaw pursued Mariydi Whitewitch in her modified Harpuiai, she figured out what the girl was thinking.

(So she's realized I'm using microwaves and has started to put together a countermeasure.)

The ability to determine what the source of the attack was and the ability to put together an effective means of fighting it were two very different things.

Ramil audibly gulped at how quickly Mariydi was able to begin putting together her next move when faced with the microwave weapon that none of her past experience could help her with.

(Olympia Dome is an artificial island with the shape of a fried egg. Even without entering the dome, she can cause some interference in the electromagnetic waves by flying in between the buildings in the outer sections!)

Mariydi was likely either trying to use the buildings as shields or have them cause diffuse reflection to lower the destructive power of the microwaves. And she would counterattack given the slightest opening. The machineguns and missiles were of course a threat, but when flying amongst buildings at extreme high speed, there was also a very real risk of running into a building.

(Is she insane? Dammit. But I have to do it. I have to eliminate this threat!!)

【harpuiai マイクロウェーブ兵装搭載機】
harpuiai equipped microwave armament

全長… 17.1メートル

全高… 5.5メートル

全幅… 14.3メートル

火器最大装備時重量… 25.9トン

最高速度… 時速2430キロ（アフターバーナー使用時）

用途… 多用途戦闘機

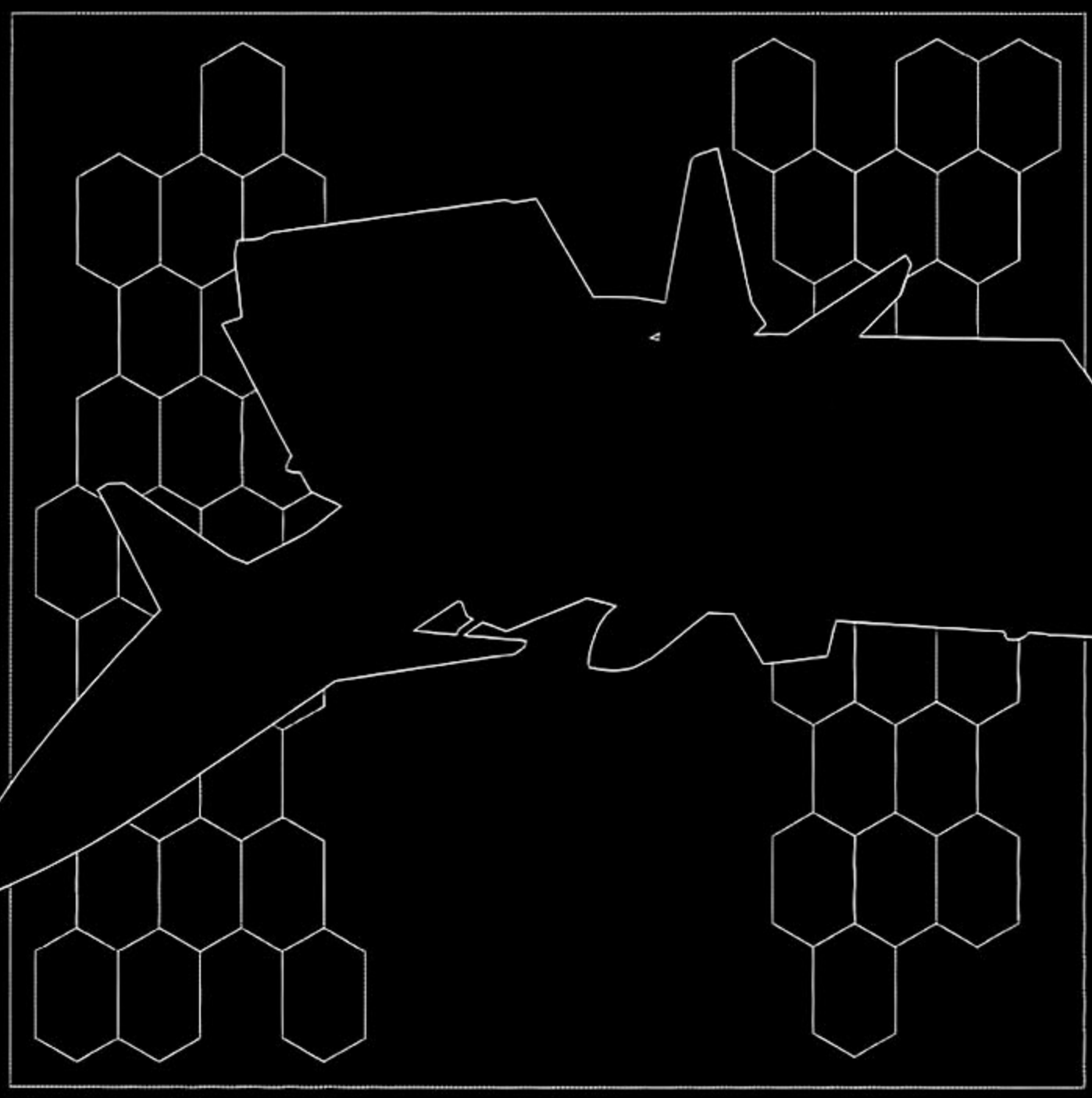
乗員… 1名

運用者… ラミール＝スコッフロー

動力… ギリシア圏営空軍戦力工場製prometheus V×2
（VTOL推力可変モデル）

兵装… マイクロウェーブ受電板×2、マイクロウェーブ放射装置×2、
20ミリ機銃×1

メインカラーリング… グレー



harpuiai equipped microwave armament

If she remained above the buildings while pursuing Mariydi, the microwaves would be reflected too much by the buildings to take the girl out. Also, the microwaves from the generator satellite meant Ramil's radar was almost entirely useless. She could not allow herself to lose sight of her target. While she tried to find her again, the girl could head straight for the Ocean Substation and ruin everything.

She had to bring her down here.

And so she matched Mariydi's altitude and fired the microwave armament at her while weaving through the buildings.

If Ramil could only hit with the main brunt of the microwaves heading straight out from the nose of her fighter, Mariydi's fighter would be taken out in just a few seconds.

Part 6

"Ice Girl 1 to CT! Use the anti-cyclone alarm switch to keep everyone in outer block 3 inside! The wavelength of the microwaves used is likely only a few centimeters. They should be unaffected as long as they stay inside the reinforced concrete buildings of Olympia Dome!!"

Mariydi Whitewitch had no idea if she was getting through, but she shouted into the radio nonetheless.

She had noticed the enemy fighter pursuing her from behind. Her radar was still not functioning, but that meant the enemy fighter using microwaves was approaching.

(The normal laws of the sky won't work on that modified Harpuiai. I won't survive if I try to fight using normal methods. I need to abandon all of my preconceptions. I will do whatever it takes to win. I didn't join that PMC air force to get shot down here!!)

Mariydi immersed herself in thought while she shot through the gaps between buildings, under pedestrian bridges, and right past walls and the ground at high speed.

The digital displays giving her altitude and direction were no longer of any use.

Her life rested in what she could feel in her fingertips.

(The key point of this new battlefield is the introduction of these microwaves as a trump card. This demonic weapon both slowly but surely builds up damage and also interferes with radar and communications as a side effect.)

She already knew where she was headed.

But she had no guarantee she would reach that spot. And she was not guaranteed victory even if she did reach it. As previously stated, the usual laws of the sky she had always relied on did not apply here. So even if she could cleanly lay out all of the

conditions, she had none of the experience needed to string together a definite estimation of what would happen.

In other words, this was a gamble.

Even so, the match would never begin unless she laid her chip on the table.

And the chip she was betting was her own life.

(But it isn't like I have no chance of winning. Just like you have that microwave armament as a trump card, I have a trump card of my own.)

Mariydi manipulated the control column as she shot straight past a traffic light.

(A trump card called a Harpuiai.)

Part 7

Ramil Scofflaw's guess was as follows:

Olympia Dome was shaped like a fried egg. Groups of buildings were lined up in the outer section. Therefore, Mariydi would travel along the edge of the central dome to circle around as long as needed within the outer section.

Once she left the buildings, Mariydi would no longer be able to escape the microwaves.

For that reason, she would travel in a circle rather than a straight line in order to never have a finish line.

It was good enough to resolve the immediate threat, but it meant Mariydi had to continue fleeing forever. She had no way to turn her fighter around and counterattack.

(Has she given in to fear and is doing nothing but evading me? …No. This is Ice Girl 1. Is she trying to use some acrobatic flying to get me to crash into one of the buildings?)

But that was not it either.

Mariydi Whitewitch had a set destination.

It was one of the sightseeing spots in the outer portion of Olympia Dome.

A waterway artificially dragged seawater into the giant artificial island. Several bridges spanned the waterway in a row.

Seven steel bridges existed in all.

When lit up, they glowed in seven different colors, forming a rainbow bridge.

She was headed for the Bifröst Arch.

In that instant, Mariydi unhesitatingly flew underneath the arching bridges. Not much space existed between the seawater and

the steel constructions. Ramil gritted her teeth and forced down her fear. The Bifröst Arch was made up of seven parallel steel bridges. From a certain perspective, it was a bit like a tunnel.

If she aimed from above, the microwaves would be reflected.

If she was to target Mariydi, she had to go below the bridges as well.

(I see. So you're trying to trick me here!! If I panic and head above the bridges, my microwaves can't hit you. And the bridges are over 200 meters long, so you can turn and change direction if you want to!!)

Until then, Mariydi had been in front and Ramil at the back while they continued in the same direction through the narrow gaps between buildings, so only Ramil could attack.

Mariydi planned to change her direction.

It only had to be 90 degrees off from Ramil's direction. She would change her direction so that Ramil lost sight of her. Then Mariydi would cut through the buildings as a shortcut and find her way onto Ramil's tail. Then it would be her turn to attack.

"But you underestimated me. If I know what you're trying to do, you have no chance!! Did you really think the Rocket Icarus would be so easily tricked!?"

As she shouted out to encourage herself, Ramil lowered her already low altitude. She was now flying just above the surface of the water in the waterway jutting into the outer urban area.

She flew below the bridges.

She flew directly below the Bifröst Arch.

She flew into the darkness in her pursuit of Mariydi Whitewitch .

As expected, her enemy was moving slowly.

While beneath the Bifröst Arch, any rise or descent risked hitting the water or the bridges. Since she was planning to turn the fighter on its side and make a wide turn, she had no choice but to slow down first.

And she had no idea this made her fighter even easier to target with the microwave armament.

"It's over, Ice Girl 1. Your death will help lay the foundation of the Olympics!!"

Just as she was about to fire that finishing shot, Ramil Scofflaw noticed something was off. She quickly realized the feeling came from an optical illusion. Mariydi's fighter should have been decelerating to prepare for the dangerous turn, but the fighter looked too large even for that. Perspective was used to determine how far away an object looked, so some kind of optical illusion was making the fighter look bigger than it was which in turn made it look closer than it was. For example, when a white box and a black box were placed the same distance way, the white box would look closer. Some similar effect was at work here.

But it was still strange.

Nothing about Mariydi's Harpuiai should have been causing such an optical illusion. And Ramil had never experienced it before. It was strange for the optical illusion to begin the instant she passed beneath the Bifröst Arch.

(No, wait.)

Doubt entered Ramil's mind, but it was too late.

(This isn't an optical illusion!! It really is getting closer!? Shit… no…shit!! She tricked me!?)

The fighter was stopped in midair.

Since Ramil was moving at faster than the speed of sound, it appeared to be approaching.

When she thought about it, it was simple, but Ramil's senses were specially attuned to a world where time, distance, and speed were all relative to moving at several hundred km/s or even over 1000 km/s. The possibility had been completely outside of her expectations.

A fighter was a vehicle that had to be constantly moving forward to not crash.

And so her opponent would always be moving at high speed.

Mariydi Whitewitch had turned that basic thought process of fighter pilots on its head.

Or more accurately, her Harpuiai had.

That fighter had VTOL ability.

The direction of the air brake and thrust could be greatly changed. She had taken that thrust meant to allow vertical takeoffs and used to bring into the battlefield the possibility of stopping in midair like a helicopter.

(Not good!!)

Was a motionless target an easy target?

Was it an easier target than one constantly moving at supersonic speeds?

From the perspective of someone aiming from a stationary position on the ground, it was. However, the same could not be said when you were in a fighter moving at faster than the speed of sound. Due to relative velocity, the target would grow before one's eyes in an instant. Fighters existed in a world where one could collide with an object 300 meters away after a single second. By the time Ramil realized what was happening, she could no longer keep up with the situation that was changing with dizzying speed.

She activated the microwave armament in desperation, but only the outer edge of the effects hit.

Mariydi's fighter slightly altered the direction of its vertically-fired thrust to tilt slightly diagonally.

At tremendous speed, Ramil's fighter shot through the gap this opened.

Yes.

She overshot her target.

For a fighter that had been targeted from behind, this was an opportunity to turn everything around. Front and back. The instantaneous reversal of that relationship gave the targeted fighter the chance to target its attacker.

Many special maneuvers had been developed for fighters such as Pugachev's Cobra and the barrel roll. Many of those had been developed specifically to cause such an overshoot.

And…

Mariydi Whitewitch had succeeded.

She had succeeded in her special maneuver of stopping her fighter using the vertical thrust of the VTOL.

"Shit…"

If her radar had been usable, Ramil may have been able to tell the proper distances.

But it had been Ramil herself who had brought the microwave armament to the battlefield as her trump card.

And…

It turned out that trump card could be used by more than just Ramil.

"Shiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiitttttttttttttttttttttttttttt!!"

Part 8

And Mariydi Whitewitch did not hesitate to move the index finger of the hand holding the control column.

"Attack Gun."

The modified Harpuiai that had just overshot in front of her was torn apart starting with the back output of the jet engine. The damage quickly spread to the main wings and body. The fighter shook as if it was trying to escape for an instant, but the steel bridges were above and the ocean water was below. There was no room for any flashy special maneuvers.

The modified Harpuiai was unable to escape the stream of machinegun bullets and the destruction continued.

Once it reached a certain point, the fighter exploded.

Ramil's ejection parachute did not activate even at the very end.

She may have avoided using it for fear of hitting the steel bridges above. Or perhaps not ejecting was a means of displaying her conviction. Mariydi had no way of knowing.

"Attack Delta. Strike," said Mariydi as if carving the woman's name into a gravestone.

She then felt something welling up within her.

Mariydi brought a hand to her mouth like a trainee that had lost to the Gs, but what she coughed up onto her thighs was a dark-red mass of blood.

The maneuver she had pulled had put that much of a burden onto her young body.

Merely using the VTOL ability for its intended purpose wore away at her nerves, so suddenly changing the direction of thrust while moving at high speed in the narrow space under a bridge was quite a stunt indeed. To be honest, she would not have been surprised had the fighter lost its balance and crashed. She may have looked completely stationary from Ramil's perspective, but she had really only slid forward while rapidly decelerating. (And at several hundreds of km/s at that.) The rapid deceleration had enveloped her ribs in massive inertial forces and the cockpit itself had seemed to tremble. As a pilot, it was something she never wanted to experience again.

But she had won.

With that fact in mind, Mariydi set the thrust of the jet engine behind her once more.

She moved forward.

The danger to Olympia Dome was not over yet. The Ocean Substation's weaponized laser still remained.

Part 9

Iris Aggravation and the others inside the Ocean Substation noticed the change.

One of the maintenance soldiers let out a shrill voice.

"A-according to the data from the microwave generation satellite…the reflection and absorption ratio data for the microwaves has disappeared! The lieutenant colonel's fighter has …has…!!"

"A Harpuiai is rapidly approaching! It is most likely the enemy! W-we can't stop it!! The defense system and the other fighters cannot keep up with it!!"

"…"

Iris rapidly typed on her keyboard to eliminate the issue with the laser facility's software while listening to the subordinates speak.

"We need to use the laser. If that Harpuiai gets close enough to destroy the parabolic antennae or the laser firing apparatus, this will all have been a waste!!"

But the more they used the laser while she tried to fix the software, the longer it would take her. She could still do it, but it

would definitely slow her down. It was the same reason one did not activate applications while defragmenting a hard drive.

The primary reason Ramil Scofflaw had gone out in that fighter equipped with the microwave armament had been to give the laser a rest.

Iris had managed to get her work just one step away from completion using the time her commander had bought them.

What should she do now?

Should she use the low power laser to intercept the Harpuiai despite the delay it would cause?

Or should she accept the risk and focus on finishing her work as quickly as possible so they could use the high power laser on an Object and pull the trigger of war?

Iris thought for a second and came to a decision.

"There will be no 'next time' for us. This is not something that will be given to us if we simply open our arms to receive it."

Those were the words of her lost commander.

Iris Aggravation poured her own will on top of that and began rebuking in a loud voice.

"We only have now. Now!! Everything rests on whether we can fire this weaponized laser or not. It is completely preposterous to allow some other petty issue get in the way of our schedule. We

will fully weaponize this laser as quickly as possible and use it to bring an end to Olympia Dome and the Technopics!!"

Her powerful words brought order back to the chain of command that had begun to fall apart.

Their movements once more held purpose behind them.

To finish it off, Iris announced, "Our target is the Faith Organization Object Ratri!! We will confuse the pilot Elite of that Second Generation Object and her failure will lead to a melee between the four Objects protecting Olympia Dome!!"

Part 10

Since Mariydi had shot down Ramil Scofflaw, the communications and radar were functioning once more. Mariydi headed for the Ocean Substation at full speed, but she heard the bitter voice of the bodyguard who was gathering information from a broader area.

"CT to Ice Girl 1. This isn't good. We just saw the barrel of the laser firing apparatus start to turn. And it doesn't seem to be moving in your direction. The adjustments to the weaponized laser must be complete. They're about to begin the next step of their plan!!"

"If I attack now, will I make it in time!?"

"I don't know!! But the crew seems to be moving off of the deck. That's probably to avoid getting roasted by the radiant heat. They're going to fire it soon!!"

"Which Object is being targeted!?"

"Most likely the Faith Organization's Adisshmi. I think their official codename for it is Ratri. It comes from the name of a goddess of the night. It's the Object from their side, but it is not their ally. This might be an outlet for their frustration at having to go through such a complicated plan."

Mariydi called the data from the Doppler radar on the ground to a small monitor and checked the line between the Ocean Substation and Adisshmi.

The high power laser would be fired along that line.

"I have no idea if a single attack on the Ocean Substation would be enough to keep it from firing."

"CT to Ice Girl 1. What are you going to do!?"

"I can't stop the laser from firing. But if it hits the Object, a battle between the Objects will break out with Olympia Dome in the middle," said Mariydi as she felt sweat on the palm holding the control column. "But if I can find a way to refract the laser, it won't hit the Object! If the crew evacuated the deck, firing the

weaponized laser at full power will likely produce enough radiant heat to do serious damage to the deck. And that will be enough to damage the parabolic antennae too!!"

"Wait, Ice Girl 1. What are you planning to do!?"

"They can only use their weaponized laser at full power once. If that one shot doesn't work, their plan fails!! And I know the line the laser will travel along! If I interpose an 'impurity' along that line, I may not be able to deflect the laser, but I should be able to at least alter its trajectory a bit!!"

"Wait!! My job is to ensure your safety!!"

Mariydi switched off the noisy radio and used the afterburners to slice through the sky at full speed.

She was not headed for the Ocean Substation.

She was headed for the line between the giant ship and Adisshmi.

(Destroy the rotten Technopics and bring back the original wholesome Olympics, hm?)

Mariydi gave a small smile while holding the control column.

(That is a much more productive goal than mine. I simply cast aside my gold medal. But I won't let it happen. No matter how wholesome the goal may be, that goal will be dyed in red if blood must be spilled in the process. Even if your plan succeeded, all you would have is an Olympics that is filled with death.)

In the end, she found only killing no matter where she went.

She had thought she could do something productive for once by participating in the Technopics, but she had ended up doing almost the exact same thing she had done in the Northern European Restricted Zone.

But that was fine.

Mariydi Whitewitch would simply do her duty.

Acting based on feelings other than logic had created her connections with the people she had met at Olympia Dome.

(So we need to choose. And if both choices will leave us with nothing but a dark competition, I'll choose the one that involves fewer deaths.)

And Mariydi arrived at her destination.

In the next moment, the true weaponized laser was fired from the Ocean Substation.

Part 11

The brilliant white beam of light that ripped through the dim twilight just before sunset was visible from the shore of Olympia Dome. The bodyguard held an arm in front of his face to shield his eyes from the bright light, but it was still enough to penetrate straight through his eyelids.

He looked around with the afterimage still burned into his eyes and blinked several times. He finally spoke to one of his men who stood nearby.

"What happened?"

"Th-the weaponized laser was fired. But Adisshmi is unharmed . It was not hit." The man blankly replied to his commander's question. "We are monitoring transmissions from the different world powers. There seems to be some tension between the Objects, but it is unlikely to develop any further since no damage was done. The war the Faith Organization group was planning is unlikely to occur."

"I doubt this is just a case of them aiming poorly."

"The weaponized laser seems to have fallen into the ocean water before it reached Adisshmi. An area of water is boiling as we speak. The steam is visible with the naked eye. It was most likely refracted midway."

"…"

If the laser had been refracted, something had to have caused it.

The bodyguard doubted some convenient mirage had occurred.

It had to have been something artificial.

For example, if there had been a large explosion or a large mass of metal along the path of the laser.

"What about Mariydi Whitewitch?"

"We cannot contact her."

"What happened to the Harpuiai she was flying!?"

Epilogue

Due to Mariydi Whitewitch's heroic decision and the many lives she saved as a result, her gold medal would be hers for all eternity.

Some voiced the opinion that her medal should be stripped off her, but the above-mentioned decision was the final answer given and her results in the women's shootathlon could be summed up in the following words.

"She did an excellent job," muttered Alicia Sloppyjoes as she stood along of one of the pedestrian pathways across the seven bridges of the Bifröst Arch.

She held a pile of documents in one hand that contained all of the official records for the Technopics.

After Mariydi Whitewitch stopped its destruction, the competition continued amidst all the enthusiasm and profit. Digital values and results continued to be made.

Alicia spoke into the cell phone she held in the other hand.

"This has brought the publicity for the sponsor's new rifle above the set value. Whatever the fate of Mariydi Whitewitch may have been, it did not bring any losses to us. In fact, we can even assume the beautiful story added to the gold medal brought about even more publicity than the original contract specified."

Alicia was speaking with someone from the advertising firm she worked for.

They had expressed some concerns, but Alicia stood as tall as ever.

"It is true she took a few actions that are in violation of international law even if she only did so to resolve the situation. Using a captured Harpuiai to perform unauthorized military actions was especially bad. …But that should not negatively affect the view of the new rifle. In fact, if Whitewitch is now taken down as the official athlete used to advertise the rifle, the people could easily interpret it as the sponsor trying to eliminate the athlete who fought to save so many lives. That would do more damage than anything else."

The person on the other end of the call seemed to think it over, but ultimately gave in.

Leaving the details to the main company, Alicia said, "So that is how we will deal with this. If we can keep these excellent results talked about, we can draw in new sponsors."

Alicia then ended the call and looked out across the waterway beyond Bifröst Arch's handrail.

Standing as tall as ever and as expressionless as ever, she said, " And now I must say farewell to you as well, Mariydi Whitewitch."

Stacy Palmetto the pharmacist was gathering her luggage in her hotel room.

However, her luggage included things like a giant industrial refrigerator. For her, "gathering" her luggage meant attaching numbered stickers to every piece of luggage so that workers could package it all up and carry it out.

"In the end," she said into the cell phone she held between her cheek and shoulder while attaching the numbered stickers. "This was a failure. A complete failure. Was the problem that little Mariydi came from a military background? I modified the doping so it would be pretty safe, but she still didn't want anything to do with it. Yes…that's right. That's exactly what I mean. Maybe I should choose a pure athlete next time. One that doesn't try to avoid me like that."

She was speaking with a contact from her parent company Drug Store Holdings. Pharmacists specializing in strengthening athletes for international events could only have so many clients. Businesses with small numbers of large contracts had very harsh ups and downs when done on one's own. It was more financially stable to register as a division of a general drug store company.

In other words, Stacy had strategically allowed herself to be absorbed by the large company.

"Hmm. Maybe next time I should advertise myself as someone who strengthens the mind along with the body by providing mental care for the athlete as well. If I do that, I can add any little chat we have onto the bill afterwards. Eh? That would put me in

competition with the counselors and stress businesses from other groups? What does that matter? I just have to beat down any rivals .”

After attaching all the numbered stickers and making sure she had not missed anything, Stacy snapped her fingers. As soon as she did, the door opened and men wearing work uniforms noisily stomped into the room.

“Take care of it all like usual,” said Stacy as she grabbed her usual bag and left the hotel room. As she walked down the hallway, she continued the cell phone conversation. “No, wait. Don’t leave me alone. Before long I’ll be off to help…what was it again? Some basketball team, right? There really isn’t any time between one contract ending and another beginning, is there? I don’t like having to renew my relationships like this. I like having some random person to talk to so I can trick my feelings. Especially given the circumstances this time.”

Stacy pressed the elevator button and waited for the light to reach her floor.

The door opened with a soft electronic tone and she muttered, “ Well, this is goodbye, Mariydi.”

Lucas Westernrose, the director from Catwalk TV, headed to Olympia Dome’s sole international airport accompanied by

cameramen carrying large cameras. They had a single reason for heading there. They were going to film the famous athletes who had gathered there to return home.

"Hello? Yes, yes, after the results these athletes have won, I doubt they will still have any issues with being filmed, yes. In fact, the main problem will be, yes, having our position taken by other stations, yes," he said within their vehicle. "Yes, yes, our competition will be trying to get rid of as many of our cameramen as possible to ensure the prime spots for themselves. The easiest method to prevent filming is to destroy the camera, yes. Make sure to follow your target of course, yes, yes, but also make sure you do not drop your camera if someone tackles you from behind, yes."

"Mr. Westernrose," said one of the cameramen with a grin. "If that's the standard, that means we can do the same to them, right? "

"…Yes, yes, as long as no one notices, yes, and it is done naturally."

Lucas Westernrose gave his calm approval.

They fought in a world where people were armed with cameras rather than guns. They had no reason to go easy on their competition while in their own field.

"Hello? Let us go over this again. We will be targeting the entrance to the airport terminal, yes, the fifth moving walkway, yes, and the immigration control gate. Yes, yes, stay in constant contact and make sure to film each of the athletes on the list for

more than 30 seconds at some point or another. Yes, make sure not to miss any of them, yes."

As members of the Information Alliance, they were always greedy for fresh information. As all the new data was produced, older information would be covered over in no time at all and would begin to fade away. There were factions that worked to ensure such information would not fade away, but Lucas and the cameramen gave no thought to such issues as they constantly worked to release new information. It could be seen as the difference between eating fresh grapes right away or letting them age so they could be drunk as wine. It was only a matter of taste; neither side was good or evil.

Yes.

The stage at which he had pursued Mariydi Whitewitch was over. And he had already put everything in order so he could truly view it as over.

One of the cameramen smiled and said, "We didn't actually get much we can air, but it was a great job for having stories to tell."

"The best jobs are those you can view as a hobby, yes, yes. But a fair amount of money is needed for that type of job. Yes, yes, so we must also do less interesting jobs, yes, to prepare an environment where we can do what we want, yes."

The vehicle stopped.

Lucas Westernrose opened the door and stepped out into the international airport.

"Hello? I am reluctant to say it, yes, but it is over now. Goodbye , Miss Whitewitch."

The bodyguard arrived at a storehouse on the outer portion of Olympia Dome.

It was not actually part of their job, but he and his men were inspecting the site. They were working with a team from Olympia Dome to check the number and type of weapons in the storehouses so that specific values could be put in the annoying paperwork.

But it was obvious the bodyguard was not very motivated since this was not actually part of his job. He held a cell phone in one hand.

"Yes, that's right. Can you just stop with the requests for a written explanation? I understand. My job was to protect Mariydi Whitewitch. And we all know how that turned out. I do understand, so just stop. I will prepare the proper paperwork. Just let me finish the work I get to actually move around with first."

The bodyguard looked over at his men who were using specialized machinery to gather fingerprints and dust.

"What? Why don't I pass the blame to Whitewitch since she was the one that took action on her own? No, I can't do that. I just can't.

She is seen as a hero who saved millions of lives on Olympia Dome. It may only be a few weeks before the gratitude wears off and people forget about her, but the timing still works against me. I would take less damage if I just submitted my written explanation like normal."

After finishing the investigation of the building, they began carrying out the weapons being used as evidence. There were small items like machineguns and explosives, but also large items like armored vehicles, helicopters, and even a fighter.

Yes.

A Harpuiai fighter.

It was the same model as the one Mariydi Whitewitch had flown. But it went further than that.

It was the exact fighter she had flown.

"You certainly have some luck," muttered the bodyguard. And then he gave a slight smile. "But that managed to just barely keep us from getting fired."

And…

Mariydi Whitewitch held the medal she had won in one hand inside a room in the Technopic Village resort hotel. She held the ribbon that would hang from her neck between her fingers and brought the pure gold medal up to her face.

"And there were rumors I was the ace pilot least likely to earn any medals."

With that casual comment, she tossed the medal into her open suitcase. To Mariydi, an honor given to her by someone else was worth nothing more than that. It was those from the Legitimacy Kingdom who were most desperate to win that kind of honor, but she doubted she could ever come to a compromise with those haughty nobles.

Mariydi placed all her belongings spread throughout the hotel room into her suitcase and thought back to what had happened.

Mariydi had taken action to stop the weaponized laser fired by the Ocean Substation, but she had of course never even considered flying her own fighter into the expected path of the laser.

She had fired every single one of her air-to-air missiles and detonated them along the expected path of the laser.

That had created a massive amount of heat as well as metal fragments of the missile.

The temperature change and metal fragments had slightly bent the laser, preventing it from hitting the Adisshmi.

Due to the great distance between the firing point and the target , even the slightest error could throw the laser off target, but she

had not known if it would work. If the temperature and humidity of that area had been slightly different, the result may have been different.

But Mariydi had won her bet.

And so she had been able to return alive with somewhere to return to.

"I guess that's everything."

With all of her belongings inside the suitcase, she locked it with various methods. Pieces of the tag attached at the airport still remained, but she was already headed back to the airport to get on another airplane.

She was returning to the Northern European Restricted Zone.

She would once more be participating in those long-drawn out wars as the ace pilot of a PMC air force.

The room now lacked any sense of livelihood like it was a model room. That emptiness combined with the slight smell of life remaining gave her a sense of loneliness. However, her working environment would not allow her to extend her stay here. In fact, she had completely forgotten about the idea of paid vacation. She had no idea how much time she had stocked up.

Mariydi rolled the suitcase toward the room's exit.

As she did, her cell phone vibrated slightly.

She stopped to check and found an advertisement email from a health device company. Mariydi deleted it without reading it, but her fingertips stopped suddenly right afterwards.

A few new names had been added to her address book.

They belonged to the people she had met at Olympia Dome.

"I didn't think this was a productive job, but I suppose I did gain something."

Mariydi gave a thin smile as she put away her phone.

She seemed to be saying those names were more valuable than the pure gold medal.

And she finally opened and closed the hotel room door.

Afterword

So is this the 5th novel? Writing multiple manuscripts at the same time is a bit odd because I don't actually know which order they will be released in.

This is Kazuma Kamachi.

This is a side story. It is the story of a girl who is much dryer than Quenser and Heivia. I think the concept of the Northern European Restricted Zone first appeared in Adoption War, but now we have an ace pilot from there as our protagonist.

The Technopics appearing in this novel is a type of "battle" that has been twisted by modern technology just like the clean wars created by Objects.

Naturally, doping is bad. And there is no sense of sportsmanship left if the ones who spend the most money on sportswear and shoes automatically win.

But…

How far would humans go if they were not bound by any of those rules?

That was the slightly imprudent question that expanded into this story. I think one of the few advantages fiction has over reality is the ability to deal with this kind of thing that is either impossible or ill-advised in reality. What do you think?

Also, the world of this story has a field that uses the same technology as the Technopics but is not bound by the rules of sports.

That is of course the military.

To put it simply, the Elites who pilot Objects and the athletes participating in the Technopics both resulted from the same technologies and they both fight different sorts of proxy wars to avoid a longer, more drawn out war.

Mariydi Whitewitch can be seen as a different sort of Elite who branched off from the main story, so I felt she was well suited as the protagonist of a side story.

And since I was doing a side story, I thought it would be fun to use a different viewpoint than the Legitimacy Kingdom. Instead of simply using the systems and customs of the other world powers, it's interesting to see the very basis of the characters change so they react differently in what they find completely natural or very strange.

In other words, I can have fun by questioning the things Quenser and Heivia find natural and have the things they would find shocking be accepted as normal. You shouldn't trust everything those two idiots say, okay?

When writing a school story, I feel like you have to make the reader want to go to that school, but in a story like this, that kind of "tour of the school" isn't necessary. I feel that is a big reason I am able to show the mercilessness of the systems of society.

I want to do everything I can to write more stories that make you afraid of living in that world but make you feel the characters are amazing to live there, so look forward to that.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Nagiryo-san and my editor Miki-san. With a setting like a giant manmade island, I wanted some help from the illustrations and the atmosphere kept changing between battlefield and sports arena, so I think this must have been an annoying job to deal with. I thank them for sticking with me once more.

And I give my thanks to the readers. A side story is something you can only do with a continuing series, and I feel that it is most certainly thanks to all of you that this was possible. I am truly thankful.

I hope this book will remain in your heart in some way.

I shall lay down my pen here.

With Second Venice and the like, I placed some foreshadowing I don't know when I will ever use.

-Kamachi Kazuma